

# SCIENCE FICTION AGE

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**JACK WILLIAMSON:**  
Inventing SF

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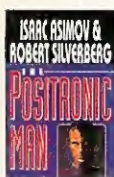
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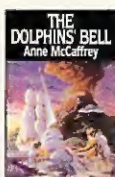
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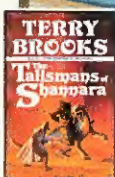
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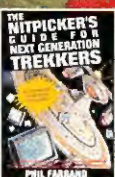
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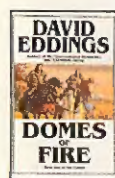
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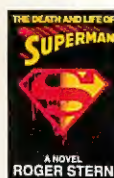
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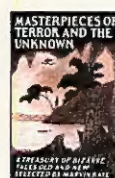
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*COVER: The way the future ought to be once space is ours. Art by John Berkey. ABOVE: Someday perhaps, we'll all leave Earth and move to the stars. The first step will be a permanent space station—see Science, page 24. Art by Pamela Lee for the Pamela Sargent book Venus of Dreams.*

# SCIENCE FICTION AGE

## F I C T I O N

## D E P A R T M E N T S

### 6 LETTERS

Art vs. Science, and a reader speaks in defense of intellectuals.

### 8 EDITORIAL

We should only give our children the best of Science Fiction Futures.

### 10 BOOKS BY FEELEY, HIRSCH, DANIEL

Generation starships, kangaroo detectives, cyberpunk, God, the Devil and more.

### 20 TELEVISION BY ANDREW DOWLER

Go on the set of William Shatner's *Tekwar* in a *Science Fiction Age* exclusive.

### 24 SCIENCE BY BEASON, HALDEMAN, LANDIS

Someday we will all get the chance to live in space. Why not now?

### 30 ESSAY BY JACK WILLIAMSON

One of SF's living treasures looks back to how it all began.

### 70 GALLERY BY BEN BOVA

A close-up and personal look at Vincent Di Fate, artist's artist.

### 76 COMICS BY ADAM-TROY CASTRO

Barry Windsor-Smith is back for *Rune*, a tale of an alien vampire.

### 82 GAMES BY STEVE WEAVER

Syd Mead created the look of *Blade Runner*, and now he's taking over your computer.

### 90 CONTRIBUTORS

## 32 SIMPLE SOULS

*By Richard Parks*

Something was broken in Billy's brain, and the scientists wanted to give him another. Risking your life for intelligence may give you more than you bargained for.

## 38 THE RIVER'S TIME

*By Mark W. Tiedemann*

Gam Ottenner was happy sandwiched between water and sky, until the day the stars threatened to steal his heart. Rivers may not be enough for one who dreams of heaven.

## 46 SURVIVORS

*By Steven Popkes*

Even after 20,000 years and a nuclear inferno, planet Earth will still contain its share of survivors.

## 52 TAKEN FOR A RIDE

*By Brian Stableford*

Video arcade ace Joe Rutherford is an expert at zapping spacewhales and voidsharks, but he'll soon discover that time travel can be murder. It doesn't always pay to be the best.

## 58 ORBITUARY

*By Jeffrey G. Liss*

To space or not to space, that is the question... but the answer might be too horrible to live with.

## 62 SHERLOCK THE BARBARIAN

*By David Garnett*

In a savage world, once you have eliminated the impossible, the truth may be wizardry. A barbarian detective learns that solving some mysteries may be far from elementary.



# SCI-FI VIDEO CORNER



## PROJECT A-KO

This animated feature is the best in Japanimation. A-KO is a normal teenager...except that within her diminutive frame lies superhuman strength. Direct from Japan this is one of the best-selling features. Dubbed in English. Caution: Contains nudity.



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## PLAN 9 FROM OUTER SPACE

This is by far, the hands down, number one worst movie ever made. But no matter how bad this movie is, it is one that everyone wants to collect. In this unintentionally hilarious film, aliens from outer space invade Earth and attack it by raising the dead. Bela Lugosi is in this movie, but he died during filming. He was replaced by an unknown actor who constantly hid himself behind a cape.

#3734 Approx. 78 minutes \$29.98



## FANTASTIC PLANET

This enthralling animated fantasy is about a future earth run by huge blue creatures who keep humans as pets. A group of humans stage a daring revolt to gain their freedom but their masters initiate a series of repressive acts to maintain control. This imaginative film won numerous awards at festivals in both Europe and the United States.

#6073 Approx. 72 minutes \$19.98

## THX 1138

George Lucas directed this film about a 25th century world where mankind is forced to take mind and mood altering drugs. When two people avoid the "medication" they begin to experience the need for freedom. Stars Robert Duvall and Donald Pleasence. This was Lucas' directorial debut.



#5709 Approx. 88 minutes \$19.98

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#6107 Approx. 98 minutes \$19.98

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Dear Mr. Edelman:

Ben Bova's eloquent essay on the sad state of the genre in film form was discerning and indisputable. However, I do not share Mr. Bova's heartfelt optimism as expressed in his closing paragraphs. Hollywood in its present form does not seem receptive to either true SF concepts or original ideas. The movie corporations pander to the lowest common denominator with a precise skill that would make Lee Iacocca proud. The industry is totally profit-based, and creativity and dissent seem unwelcomed by the studios. I would rather watch "bad" movies on my VCR than fork over money to see *Friday the 13th: Part 88* or incestuous remakes of good films like *Forbidden Planet*.

Timothy Walters

Dear Sir:

I am a chemist working in a research and development department of a petroleum engineering company. I am involved in both theoretical and experimental chemistry, and while I do not "theorize" in the morning and "experiment" in the afternoon, as Geoffrey Landis suggests in your January 1994 Science column, I do both continually.

As a Sci-Fi fan, I can see two sides of writing Sci-Fi. Well-written stories *don't need a good scientific basis*. That's the whole idea behind *fiction*: "The wilful suspension of disbelief" as an early literature teacher put it. The early Pern books by Anne McCaffrey had some glaring scientific boo-boos, but people bought them in droves. In her later books, as she attempted to explain some of the assumed facts, she got herself into even more theoretical doo-doo, but people *kept on buying!* In explanation, however, her writing is so superb that her fans (myself included) ignore the "real" science and "go with the flow" of her creation. It's *fiction!*

I've tried to read the works of other authors who are "scientists" first, writers second. All the theoretical background is covered, and the purported future is not only feasible, but much of the "gadgets" is available, albeit very expensive. Unfortunately, however, the stories stank.

In my opinion, as both a chemist (not just any scientist) and an avid reader of Science Fiction, I believe it takes a *writer* to write good stories, Sci-Fi or otherwise. The better the storyteller, the less "sound" I need the theoretical science to be.

Jim Millard

Dear Mr. Edelman:

I'm 15 years old, and am an avid reader of your excellent magazine.

I just wanted to say how deeply I was moved by your editorial on Isaac Asimov. I,

too, want to be a science fiction writer, as you did when you were 17. I have been writing for several years, submitting to magazines when I can. I have not yet had anything published outside of my high school's literary magazine, but I won't give up. And I also cite Isaac Asimov as my major influence.

I wish he could have lived, and that I could have met him, or written to him, or talked to him, but it just didn't work out that way. But your editorial, and the quotations from The Good Doctor contained within, gave me the answers I needed, and have helped me a great deal. Isaac Asimov was undoubtedly the greatest science fiction mind the world has ever known, and he has, as you said, influenced countless fledgling writers, and his illustrious writing career will surely continue to influence countless more.

Sincerely,  
Greg Miller

Dear Mr. Edelman:

I have just finished reading the Science column and Ben Bova's essay on SF films in the January 1994 issue. Both of these articles bemoan the lack of accurate portrayals of science and scientists in mainstream media, but this is only a symptom; none of the gentlemen touched on (what I believe is) the cause, the "disease", if you will.

The problem is not that people in general see science (or scientists) as evil or misguided, but that they resent superiority in any form. It is from this attitude that terms such as "bookworm" and "jock" stem. Charles Sheffield was right on the money when he stated that scientists are "not just as good as other people—they're better than other people." That is why, Mr. Andrews, the movies never show "all the work that went into designing any of this stuff" that we see in *Star Trek* and other so-called science fiction shows and films. To a scientist (or even a moderately intelligent person), such detail would be interesting, perhaps even exciting. To the average viewer it would be boring, and most likely, incomprehensible. That is also why, Mr. Bova, there are so few "real" Science Fiction films.

Messrs. Andrews, Benford, Bova, Landis and Sheffield: you are all intellectuals. It is an increasingly rare breed, and consequently, the misconception and misrepresentation of science and scientists will probably continue and, in fact, escalate in the foreseeable future.

Sincerely,  
Carl F. Green

*Readers—Please let us know how we're doing at: Letters to the Editor, Science Fiction Age, P. O. Box 369, Damascus, MD 20872.*

# SCIENCE FICTION AGE

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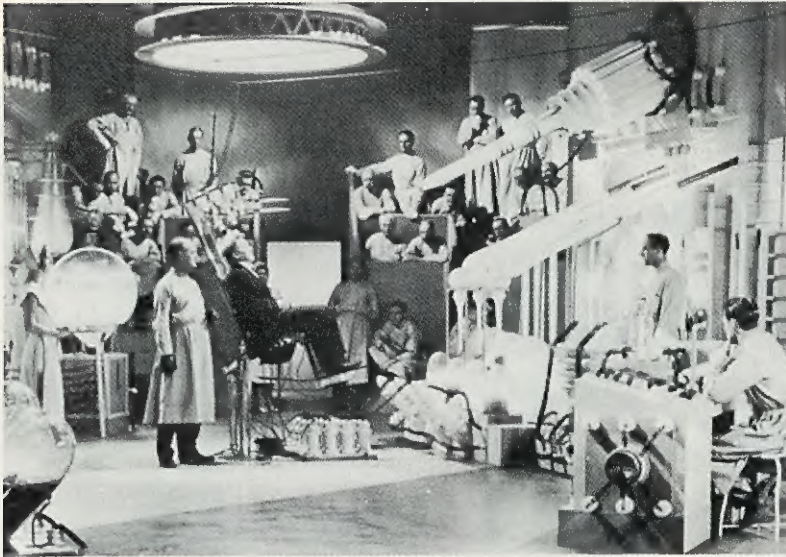




## EDITORIAL

By Scott Edelman

# We must leave our children the best of science fiction futures.



*Yesterday's SF  
futures, seen here  
in the 1930 film  
Just Imagine, rarely  
come to pass. But  
what about today's?*

I SPENT A FEW HOURS YESTERDAY MORNING AT THE Damascus Elementary School's open house, and as I sat in my son Trevor's third grade class, I found myself wondering what sort of future I would hand over to him. Science fiction presents us with so many different futures. Which one would be his?

Predicting the future isn't easy. Not all of the predictions of my own childhood came true. We're not yet flitting to work with nuclear jet-packs, popping three nutritional pills a day instead of eating real food, or having our robots do the housework while we zip to the moon for our family vacations. Yet we do have cellular telephones, fax machines, miracle drugs, personal computers, ATMs and artificial hearts, as well as unexpected social changes, such as the breakup of the Soviet Union.

But the surprises have not all been good. The future of my childhood which has now come to pass as my present also contains many unexpected occurrences, changes that are also unwanted—AIDS, heightened racial tensions, the crumbling of our inner cities, and a societal milieu that seems to teach our children that drugs, guns, sex and money is where it's at.

That's the jumbled future I got. The good mixed in with the bad, and not quite what I'd expected as I'd studied the future through the pages of SF. With the present so unlike what any of us expected, how can I envision the future that will be handed to my son?

I'm afraid I can't. Contrary to the myth of our genre as predictor, no one in SF is equipped with a crystal ball. All I can do is hope.

Here is the future I hope for my son.

I look forward to a day when disease will die. Advances in nanotechnology will allow microscopic robots to enter the human body and repair all faults. A broken arm, a ruptured liver, even cancer will vanish under the

watch of robots much too small for humans to see.

I hope for a day when we will not be bound to the planet Earth. Space will no longer be a destination just for government employees and a few lucky civilians. My son will know the moon in a way that I have forever given up knowing.

I imagine a world without overcrowding, for those of us that wish to will all have moved out to the stars.

My son will have all the information he could ever want at his fingertips, whenever he wants it. He will carry an electronic Library of Alexandria in his pocket. He will be able to stay in constant communication with all the world, and sift at will through all the globe's wisdom. His world will be smaller than mine.

I look forward to the day when we will meet a true alien intelligence, and recognize that the differences between us earthlings are minor ones. The astronauts long ago pointed out to us that from the heavens, the world has no borders. Contact with extraterrestrials, one that are believed and documented rather than scoffed at, may be what is needed to teach us this lesson that we should already know. We will trade in the United Nations for the United Planets.

There will no longer be hunger. Genetic manipulation will create greater crop yields, and transportation advances will close the gaps between farm and market. Anti-grav hoppers will carry football-sized fruit to the world's starving. Ignorance will pass from the Earth. The hardware of our brains will be accessible to the software of the future as are today's computers. Need to know a foreign language, or differential calculus? Either will be able to be downloaded to our hungry synapses. Instead of renting a movie for the weekend, we might be able to rent a memory.

I have a dream that the world will have no further need of martyrs.

I foresee a day when fruits of these sciences, technologies and arts will be available to all the people, and not just those fortunate enough to afford them. The gap between rich and poor will vanish.

Perhaps even death itself will die, because anyone who cannot be fixed will be placed in cryogenic suspension, to be thawed out when science has advanced to the point of a cure. Perhaps my son will live forever.

I look to a day when we will forget this planet's petty hates, and move on to conquer the universe.

As you read my optimistic list, you might be thinking, but what of all the bad things that science has brought us? What about radiation sickness and new ways to kill each other? What about the new menaces that will come to replace the ones we already have?

Those, too, are waiting out there for my son, yes. But please forgive me a father's irrational hope that we will take from our SF futures only the best that we as a people have to offer.

There's no reason that can't happen, if instead of thinking of ourselves, we just keep thinking of the children. □



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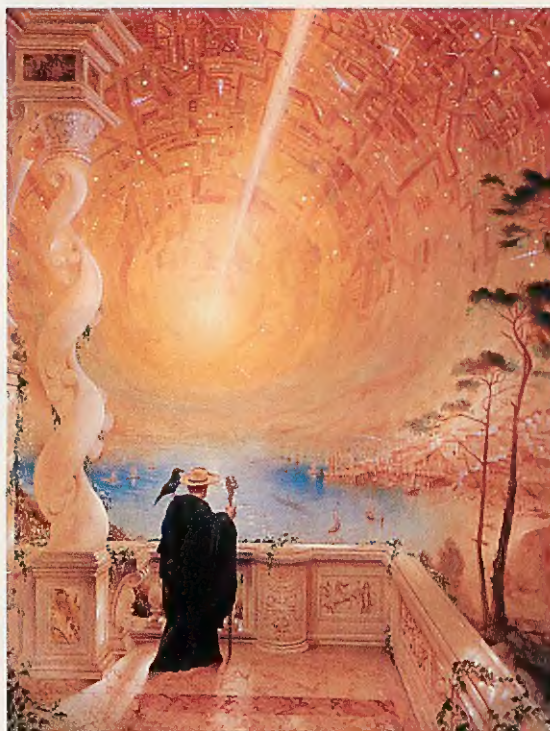


## BOOKS

By Gregory Feeley

### Gene Wolfe's starship saga continues with a Long Sun that cannot be eclipsed.

Gene Wolfe's tetralogy depicts a spaceship so large and ancient, its passengers do not remember its origins. Cover art by Richard Bober.



WITH THE SECOND VOLUME OF HIS NEW tetralogy, Gene Wolfe's tale of revelation, revolution, theophany and conceptual breakthrough quickens its pace, while occasionally pausing for deep breaths. Last year's *Nightside the Long Sun* took place over a period of only 24 hours, with nearly a quarter of its length devoted to the night-long assault by the fearful Patera Silk upon the estate of the gangster who now controlled his manteion (this ancient Greek word for "oracle" here denotes a church of the faith which Silk earnestly serves).

*Lake of the Long Sun* (Tor Books, 352 pp., \$21.95), which begins almost immediately afterward, covers only a slightly longer period, but events in it expand like ripples in a pond, as the divine revelation of Patera Silk, young augur of the city's poorest manteion, spreads from the realm of personal enlightenment to that of political upheaval.

Few of the questions raised in the first volume are answered — we still do not know in what sense Maytera Marble is also Maytera Rose, nor the significance of the dead woman lying in an alley, which strongly recalls a similar mysterious image in *The Book of the New Sun* — but Wolfe's tetralogy (given the rather ad hoc title *The Book of the Long Sun*) is, as befits a narrative that begins with the protagonist receiving a message from God, a work of successive revelation, not mystification. Enough clues are given in the first novel's opening pages (building material is called "shiprock"; cities shine in

the firmament of the night sky) to make it abundantly clear that the setting is a hollow generation ship. Wolfe intends no moment of revelation in which protagonist and reader simultaneously discover such truths. The reader realizes almost immediately that the pantheon of "the Nine" headed by great Pas is the family of the ship's designer, now living in cybernetic immortality (people who die are said to have "gone to Mainframe"), and that the divine "Windows" in which the gods used to appear are ancient and malfunctioning computer monitors. What additional discoveries the narrative offers are, rather unusually for Wolfe, made readily explicit: when the callow Patera Silk realizes something, he generally blurts it out. Whatever its final nature, the first half of *The Book of the Long Sun* does not engage in anything like the elaborate indirection of its predecessor.

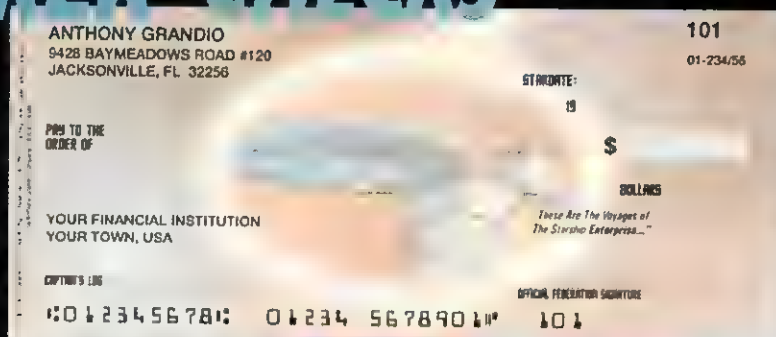
The novel's central story line is simple. Patera Silk, worried for the future of his manteion even as word of his enlightenment (and the subsequent appearance by a god in his manteion's Window) spreads, travels to Lake Limna, an outlying district of Viron, in a foolhardy attempt to blackmail a suspected spy into providing the money needed to redeem the manteion. He is himself arrested as a spy, shown successive wonders in the enormous military depot below the lake, and at last encounters his intended victim, by which time circumstances have changed. As the novel ends, political events that have meanwhile gained force envelop him.

Braiding the narrative, however, are numerous other plot threads, a design that Wolfe — who has previously used the first person for his multivolume novels — has rarely heretofore adopted. Both Severian of Urth and Lucius of the Great King's army tell their own tales, and the reader knows nothing that they do not. While Patera Silk bears many affinities and dichotomies with these other protagonists (he is compassionate and celibate while Severian is coldhearted and sexually rapacious, but both have the same lameness in one leg and a facial injury), his story does not comprise the entirety of Wolfe's novel. The Whorl — growing hotter as Urth grew chill, but both approaching an apotheosis that takes the form of a new sun — is another fallen world, where the leftover technological marvels of an earlier age are used by the powerful against the wretched masses, and no solution seems possible save one that partakes of the divine.

Some of these subplots are gripping — a scene in which the decrepit Maytera Marble finds the aged (and mostly prosthetic) Maytera Rose dead and begins to disassemble her for parts is quite affecting — while others (such as one that reveals the existence of a cabal of "Black Mechanics") are merely set-up for future volumes. A few, such as those dealing with the intrigues of Silk's ecclesiastical superiors, approach burlesque; Wolfe has grown increasingly insistent in recent years that his readers not mistake which characters in his novels are supposed to be fools.

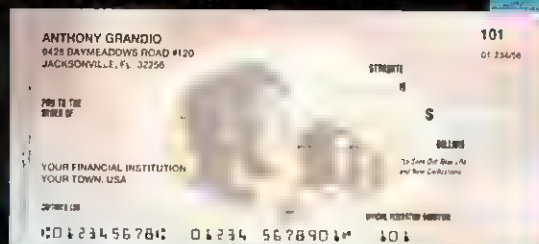


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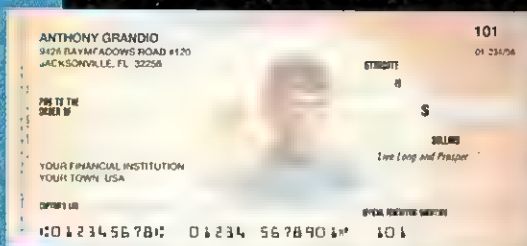
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Indeed, much of *Lake of the Long Sun* seems so open-handed that the reader may suspect hidden traps. While the religious themes in *The Book of the New Sun* were so artfully concealed as to escape all but the sharpest eyes (how many readers noticed that the Pelerines used a cross in their iconography, or that Severian is obliquely likened to both a fisherman and a carpenter?), those in the present series are quite obvious. A reference to Jesus Christ in *Nightside*'s opening pages is more explicit than any of the religious allusions in the *New Sun*; and as the present novel ends, Silk, who has lately been on the lake with fishermen, is seen riding into the city on a donkey.

Just as "the Nine" are plainly false gods, one would expect a novel so concerned with enlightenment and revelation to offer a false theophany, and it does, in a scene during

Wolfe has grown increasingly insistent that his readers not mistake which characters in his novels are supposed to be fools.

the universe of Urth and the New Sun, a fact about which he had hitherto given not the faintest clue. For the reader, the abrupt shift in the narrative frame of reference is almost vertiginous, the equivalent of the moment in which Silk thrusts his head into the observation bubble of a shuttle clinging to the hull of the Whorl and sees (although incomprehendingly) the stars.

*Lake of the Long Sun* is one of Wolfe's longest novels, and not all of its diverse ele-

ments work equally well. Several of the novel's early scenes are overlong, and Wolfe's problems with portraying women persist, especially with Chenille, the vulnerable prostitute who sometimes behaves as though she were in an early Eugene O'Neill play, and a minor character named Mamelta whose half-dressed antics ("She was naked save for a blood-smeared rag knotted about her waist, her full breasts and rounded thighs trembling") render her an unintentionally comic Amazon.

The novel ends in mud and violence, with greater violence looming like thunderheads on the tale's horizon. With a stronger conclusion than *Nightside*, Wolfe's tetralogy reaches its midpoint — Silk, besmirched and grief-stricken, on the verge of worldly elevation as the divided Whorl warms in the heat of an unseen sun. The curtain crashes down as though on Act II of a grand opera, and only the most jaded readers would think to slip away during intermission.

*Gun, With Occasional Music*, by Jonathan Lethem, Harcourt Brace, hardcover, 272 pages, \$19.95

A mystery story, even a hard-boiled detective mystery story, is "about" a lot of things: passion, death, betrayal, the search for truth. It's an excellent vehicle for exploring a societal milieu through the eyes and mind of its tougher-than-nails protagonist. By the end, if the reader also gets an answer to the whodunit—well, that almost qualifies as a bonus.

Jonathan Lethem's first novel, *Gun, With Occasional Music*, pulls off the trick feat of successfully blending two subgenres, the hard-boiled detective and the dystopian future, in a manner that brings new resonance to both disciplines.

The book starts with a quote from Raymond Chandler: "There was nothing to it. The Super Chief was on time, as it almost always is, and the subject was as easy to spot as a kangaroo in a dinner jacket."

In the course of the book, the kangaroo will turn up, though in Lethem's future it perhaps is not so easy to spot; a dinner jacket would be a help. Lethem plays fair—the kangaroo is no red herring (or for that matter, a red kangaroo). In addition, the gun in the title puts in an appearance, along with the occasional music.

What kind of detective story is this, anyway? It follows the classic hard-boiled pattern: private detective Conrad Metcalf becomes an inadvertent *sabot* in the cogs of official justice, when a client he turned down turns up quite dead. No sooner has the cops' prime suspect come to him to ask for help, than Metcalf finds himself in the middle of a muddle of illegal-drug addicts, doctors, crime syndicates, white slavery, and crooked police-equivalents.

Lethem plays his mystery cards straight. The frequent sin of SF mysteries is playing too loose and fast with hand-waving high tech; their solutions have been likened to

## BOOKS TO WATCH FOR

**The Breath of Suspension**, by Alexander Jablokov (Arkham House). A classy first short story collection by the author of *Carve the Sky*, with illustrations by J. K. Potter. Included are such favorites as the title story, "A Deeper Sea", "Living Will", "At the Cross-Time Jaunter's Ball" and others.

**Stained Glass Rain**, by Bruce Boston (Ocean View Books). Were the psychedelic '60s really as weird as this? Perhaps. Boston, poet's poet and writer extraordinaire, whose finely-crafted work you've read in these pages, looks at the decade through surreal and SF eyes.

**Dux Bellorum**, by Dafydd ab Hugh (AvoNova). A British SAS major tracks a presumed IRA agent back to the time of King Arthur to stop history from changing in this novel by the Nebula-nominated author of the very strange "The Coon Rolled Down and Ruptured Its Larinks."

**The Guide to Larry Niven's Ringworld**, by Kevin Stein (Baen). Niven's Tales of Known Space are a fan favorite, and *Ringworld*, the story that won all of SF's top awards in 1970, started it all. Ringworld, 660 million miles of habitation circling a distant star, is here put under the microscope in encyclopedic detail.

**By the Time I Get to Nashville**, by Lionel Fenn (Ace). More shoot-em-up SF as Diego travels in the Time Thing to 21st century Nashville, where he meets Belle Starr, fights cyberpunk cowpokes, and discovers that in the future, he's considered a god.

**Hot Sky at Midnight**, by Robert Silverberg (Bantam Spectra). The four-time Hugo and five-time Nebula Award winner tackles a grim future with the Earth on the verge of ecological collapse, while a Japanese megacorp is secretly funding a project to send us permanently to the stars.

**Modern Classic Short Novels of Science Fiction**, edited by Gardner Dozois (St. Martin's). Some feel that the novella is the perfect length for a SF story, and this volume may prove it, with powerful tales from Gene Wolfe, Frederik Pohl, Kate Wilhelm, Joanna Russ, and nine others.

**Future Boston**, edited by David Alexander Smith (Tor). A century from now, Boston will contain millions of human, alien and cybernetic beings, and Geoffrey A. Landis, Steve Popkes, Resa Nelson, Alexander Jablokov, the editor and others are here to tell their tale.

**The Chronicles of Pern: First Fall**, by Anne McCaffrey (Del Rey). McCaffrey's minions — her fans number in the hundreds of thousands — have long waited for this remarkable collection, the Queen of the Dragonriders' first all-original Pern short story collection.

**The Dean Koontz Companion**, by Greenberg, Gorman and Munster (Berkley). Before he became a modern master of horror, Koontz was one of ours, turning out many novels and short stories under a variety of pseudonyms. Find out how and why he traded rocketships for blood.



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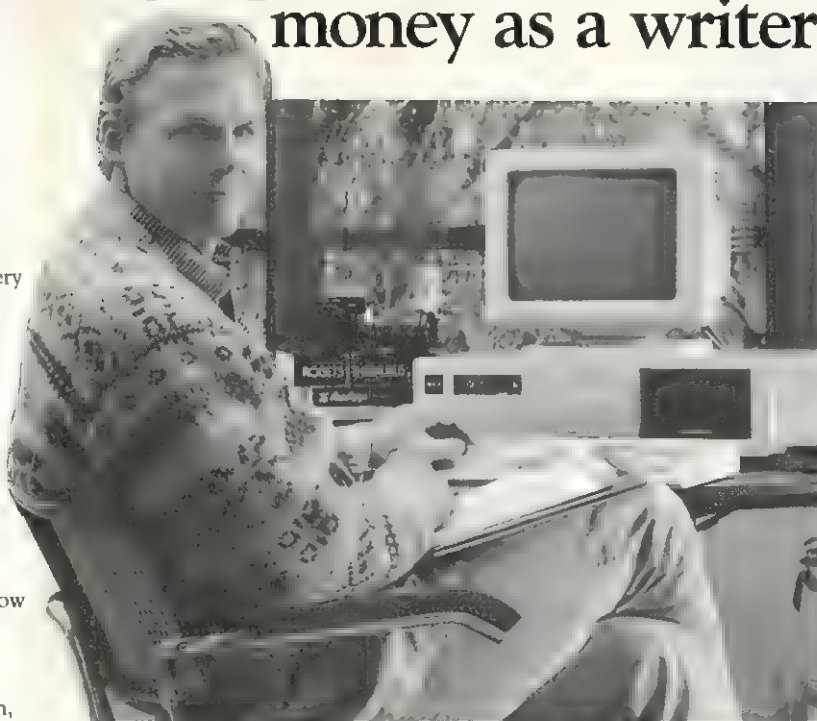
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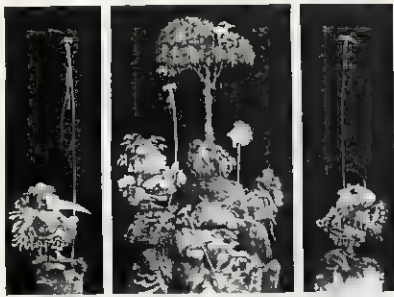
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pulling a rabbit out of a hat and calling it a *blert*. Lethem avoids such cop-outs: while the commission of the crime depends on technology unavailable in the age of Chandler, this particular mystery could be solved by Philip Marlowe with no other methods than those employed by Metcalf.

And yet...only in their nightmares would Chandler or Hammett recognize this world. We can start with that kangaroo. Evolved sentient animals have become an underclass; there are no children, only babyheads with their mental development artificially advanced.

It's considered impolite to ask direct questions, a restriction against which Metcalf by his very nature and vocation rubs raw. More sinister developments become apparent as Metcalf tries to solve his case. Print media has been outlawed; radio news gives musical interpretations of events, and the only newspaper in town is the *Oakland Photographic*—no captions, only pictures. No longer are there police, lawyers, judges or courts, only Inquisitors. Citizens carry karma cards, wherein what you might call "good citizenship" points are recorded. Drop to zero through antisocial actions and you'll get sent for a term of cryogenic suspension.

Call it *Tech Noir* if you must, but it's a tech slanted towards removing personal freedom—the better to control its citizens. This is Conrad Metcalf's world, where mood-altering, mind-altering drugs ("make") are dispensed for free at neighborhood makeries, there are no telephone books, no mention of movies or plays, and though the setting is future Oakland, San Francisco seems to be...missing.

Metcalf, our viewpoint character, has always lived in this world, knows nothing different, but suspects in his heart there must be something better. Indeed, the hard-boiled style is no narrator's affectation—Metcalf has probably never encountered works by Hammett, or seen any *film noir*. In effect, he's the product of convergent evolution. If Sam Spade didn't exist, it would be necessary to invent him.

Ultimately, the most sinister element of this milieu is make. Metcalf uses it, of course: *everybody* does. It's as ubiquitous as alcohol and cigarettes in any '40s detective story. And yet...the different blends of make clearly pack more wallop than anything Philip Marlowe ever swallowed or puffed.

Lethem's prose is clean and cool, perfect for its *noir* mood. The phrases are snappy but avoid obvious verbal clichés of the '90s—or the '40s, since Metcalf wouldn't know those references. Lethem's control is good—really good, considering in lesser hands,

descriptions and situations like these could take comic overtones, such as: talking sheep, kangaroos, and apes; characters with names like Catherine Teleprompter, Danny Phoneblum, and (my favorite) Walter Surface; and drugs with names like Avoidol, Regrettol, and Forgettol. Metcalf feels no sense of strangeness; therefore the reader should not either.

**Jonathan Lethem  
pulls off the trick  
feat of successfully  
blending two  
subgenres, the  
hard-boiled  
detective and the  
dystopian future...**

What Metcalf does feel is deep dissatisfaction. An ex-Inquisitor himself, he can sense the cracks in his world's placid facade. Murders, even violence, are rare occurrences; the Inquisitors' main punishment is cryogenic freezing. (One might call it the "Big Sleep" if one were looking for a cheap allusion, I suppose; but Lethem doesn't resort to cheap allusions.) Yet, beneath its civilized kindness, the circle draws tighter and life grows more gray and purposeless and hopeless. It takes a private

Inquisitor to notice these things, perhaps, a hard-boiled guy who refuses to let himself be lied to, even if it's himself doing the lying.

This is not an Orwellian future. Lethem allows the reader to inhale another blend of dystopia, a page from a book of Huxley's, where biotechnology and designer drugs have made life all too comfy. It is not only overt repression that we must recognize and resist. The future might not be a boot stomping on a human face, after all—it might be a pillow pressed down upon the same—forever.

**Connie Hirsch**

***Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone*, by Ian McDonald, Bantam, Feb 94, \$3.99.**

Ian McDonald is one of the better stylists working in science fiction today. With a body of solid work behind him, he continues to provide literate stories of a consistent quality. His shorter fiction in particular is always well-constructed, yet surprising. His characters have a psychological depth that is not common in a great deal of genre fiction, or fiction in general; when his setting gets closer to the present, this depth is more pronounced and, for me, his stories are better.

Part of the problem with *Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone* is the milieu. Even though McDonald has added some admirable flourishes, it is for the most part a cyberpunk near future. We have multinational companies vying it out with transnational interest blocs of various stripes. Europe and the newly emergent Southern Africa are up against Islamic alliances. Japan, where the story takes place, is the victim of a trade war that has left it destitute and politically shaky. High-tech local warlords rule the nether regions, and any central government control is only nominal.

All of this seemed plausible, even vision-



ary, in the 1980s. Big business became, for an odd moment, the cultural avant-garde, as capitalism resurged as an ideological force in a world that was bankrupt of any better ideas. But that was then, and now, well, things are different. With nationalism once again on the march (and what an ugly march it can be), and tribalism, the scourge of the third world, successfully imported to the developed countries, the cyberpunk futures are beginning to seem somehow...funny. Despite predictions that must have seemed almost certainties, we don't all fly around in helicopters and jet packs today—and there probably aren't going to be any “arcologies” 50 years from now. It seems more likely that the rest of the world might come to resemble Bosnia, where multinationals are an anachronism, but race and caste are still the same old horrific organizing principles.

McDonald's story didn't require a cyber future and would have been better off without it. Ethan Ring, an English graphic arts student, discovers something like the Jungian archetypes of icons: symbols for fear, obedience, destruction and a host of other human drives and emotions. These “fracters” are psychologically devastating to all who behold them. Ethan is, of course, co-opted into dastardly service to the ruling cyber entities, and the book is the tale of his attempt to do penance, or at least to understand and forgive himself, for the wrongs he has done in the service of the bad guys. He goes on a Buddhist pilgrimage, retracing the steps of the holy man Kobo Daishi.

Ethan is potentially the most powerful human being on Earth, and he is watched and pursued on his journey by the nebulous forces of those who want to make evil use of his discoveries. As you might expect, there is a thrillerlike climax as Ethan must choose whether or not to use his fracters against those who would control him.

Unfortunately, all of this action tends to obscure the real heart of McDonald's tale, which is also the heart of Ethan Ring. The real choice Ethan must make is between the power of the fracters and Luka Casipriadin, Ethan's lover in art school, who has been the voice of his conscience ever since. Luka is a mohawk-wearing video artist who uses jet contrails for divination. But underneath her hipster weirdness, she possesses a humane presence that McDonald captures precisely. She is no simple Victorian representative of goodness, but an embodiment of the strange, creative way that goodness can manifest itself in the world.

Ethan is no simple hero or anti-hero. His worst actions were performed under an implied blackmail from Euro-government intelligence agents, and his best deeds are tinged with a lust for the power that the fracters give him. The most satisfying moments in the book are when Ethan and Luka are together, loving one another and fighting over the curse or blessing of the fracters, which must inevitably keep the two of them apart.

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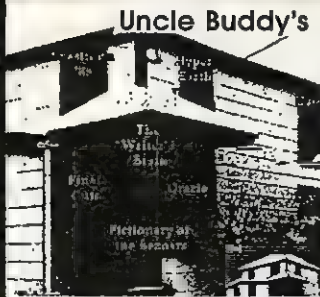
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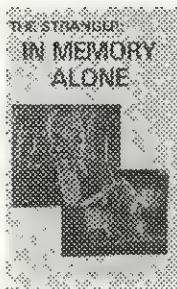
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This is an example of the intersection of strange ideas and deep characterization that is always a mark of McDonald's work. Even though he gets distracted by an improbable setting in *Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone*, McDonald pulls off a meaningful tale that is well worth skimming through the sometimes deadening jargon to find. McDonald makes it clear that Luka's fear of the fracters' harmful effects cannot be separated from her love for Ethan. While the fracters are extremely powerful, they are not embodied in a living person. There is, tellingly, no fracter for love—only obedience. Through Ethan's love for Luka, McDonald suggests that the most powerful symbol of them all is not abstract or generalizable, but must be humane to be effective.

Tony Daniel

### RECENT AND RECOMMENDED

•Pat Murphy is best known as the Nebula and Philip K. Dick Award-winning author of *The Falling Woman* and "Rachel in Love." What most people don't know is that she has a secret life as the editor of the *Exploratorium Quarterly*, the journal of a San Francisco museum that is designed to create a hands-on experience in the arts and sciences. Which explains why her latest book, *Bending Light: An Exploratorium Toolbook* (Little Brown, \$15.95, hardcover, 48 pages) is not a finely wrought work of fiction but rather a volume of eye-opening experiments designed to turn all children—and those open-minded adults who love them—into experimenting scientists. The book comes with a lens, and readers will be able to use it in dozens of activities, such as making a flashlight slide projector, a microscope and an astronomical telescope. Other interesting experiments, such as making lenses from ice as well as jello should help spark anyone's interest in the science of light. *Bending Light* is a marvelous book that will help teach a powerful lesson—that even though science is work, it can also be fun.

•Most readers of science fiction, even those who consider themselves fans, never make it to a SF convention. For those who wish to live the experience without leaving the comfort of their homes for sweaty hotels, Paul T. Riddell, the genre's answer to Hunter S. Thompson, has written *Squashed Armadillocon, or Fear and Loathing in Austin: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the Fanboy Dream* (Hillybilly Feast Press, 1993, 152 pages, trade paperback, \$10.00). *Armadillocon* is one of the field's major events, held each November in Austin, Texas. Riddell has turned a recent visit there into a gonzo book of hyper reportage worthy of Thompson himself. Along with sidekick Ernest Hogan (best known for his prose but in this instance providing caricatures and cartoons just this side of libelous), Riddell turns the con upside down. Emma Bull, Richard Kadrey, Steven P. Brown and Steve Bisette make cameo appearances in this rowdy con review that makes all the other

con coverage seem tame. No holds are barred, and most bars are visited in what might be called *Paul and Ernie's Excellent Convention*. *Squashed Armadillocon* may make those of you who've never been to a con feel they've made the right decision, but at least now you'll know why.

•What is it about science fiction and cats? Whatever the reason, the third volume of stories about those chimerical creatures edited by Andre Norton and Martin H. Greenberg, *Catfantastic III* (DAW Books, paperback, \$4.99, 320 pages), is further proof of the ineluctable attraction of these most popular pets in the country to writers in our genre. After the success of the first two installments in 1989 and 1991, a further volume was guaranteed. Featuring 20 stories, this third book in the series is sure to please all but the most ardent feline-phobic. Fan favorite Mercedes Lackey once more takes cats into space with her punningly titled "A Tale of Two Kittys," a sequel to her earlier popular yarn. Rising star Lawrence Schimel tells a tale of felines discovering opposable thumbs in "To Skein A Cat." Venerable editor Andre Norton herself provides a tale, as do Elizabeth Anne Scarborough, Susan Shwartz, Charles de Lint and Ardath Mayhar, among others. Not only does the book fulfill a seemingly never-ending addiction in SF readers for cats in unusual circumstances, but it might even prove a useful way to turn a cat-lover acquaintance on to fantasy and SF.

•*The Official Starfleet History of Computers: 20th Century Computers and How They Worked* (Prentice Hall Computer Publishing, 1993, trade paper, \$18.00) by Jennifer Flynn, takes as its conceit that it has been written as a manual to supplement Starfleet Academy's basic training in computers and Earth history. A foreword purportedly written by Lt. Commander Data states that one reason he produced this history was to discover his own history by investigating how computers came to be. The information in the book is well-written, heavily illustrated, and clearly designed, and it provides a good introduction to computers for the curious, with sections explaining the workings of hard drives, laser printers, software and other current technology as well as what the book refers to as "emerging technology," such as cybernetics and artificial intelligence. Passages from Picard, Riker and the rest of the crew are sprinkled through the text to create the illusion that this truly is a history book out of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Even if you are already a computer buff, consider this as a gift for someone you know to present a seductive introduction to our computerized present.

•After four centuries, Hieronymus Bosch has been reincarnated in the form of Patrick Woodroffe, a British artist whose work is mostly known on the other side of the Atlantic. Now it's our turn to discover his work, in *Pastures in the Sky* (Pomegranate



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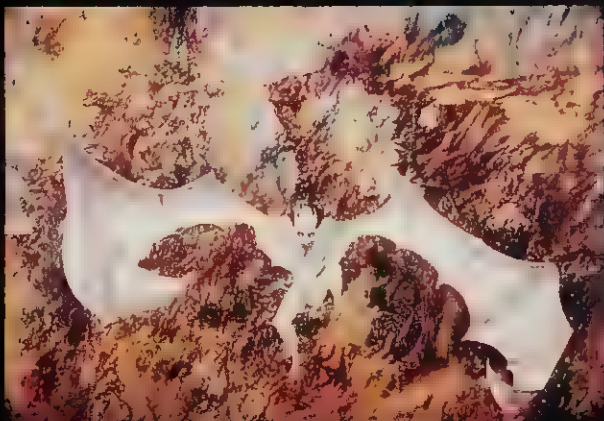
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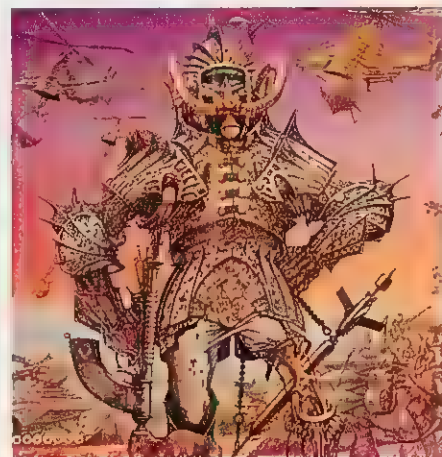
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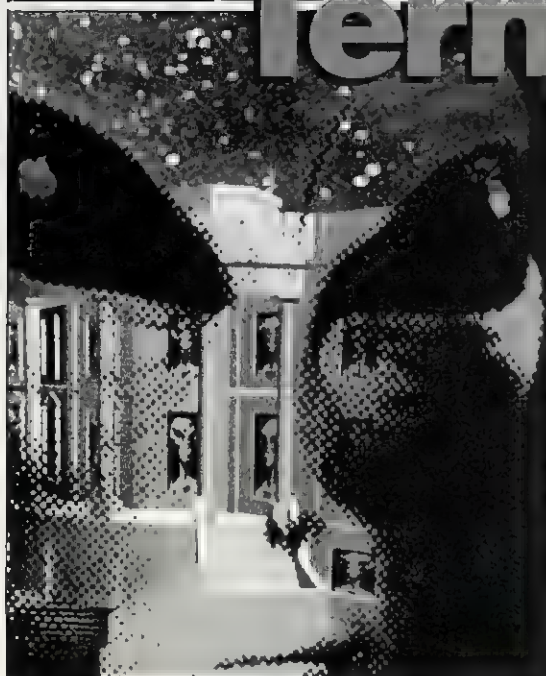
A detail from Patrick Woodroffe's painting "War—The Weeping Muse".

him a job as "creature concept designer" for the feature film *The Never-Ending Story II*. Woodroffe states that he paints because "I can invent my own world, furnish it with my own birds and beasts—even my own gods," and "I can travel to places where no one else can go." Woodroffe is only partly right, because through these pages, we are lucky enough to travel to those worlds with him.

• Though few of us have been able to blast heavenward into the night sky, all of us can stare at the glittering stars and wish to know them better. Catherine Tenant's *The Box of Stars* (Bulfinch Press, Little Brown and Company, \$24.95) is the perfect tool for this. Packaged in a beautifully designed cobalt blue box are a trade paperback, 32 cards of constellations and the stars which make them up, and two star maps, one each for the Northern and Southern hemispheres. The cards, based on a set that was first published in London in 1825 under the title *Urania's Mirror*, are designed to create easy familiarity with the night sky. The card depicting Orion, for example, not only shows us a line drawing of that heavenly hunter of legend, but also features holes of various sizes, punched and pricked into the cardboard so that when held up to the light, the stars that comprise the giant, such as Betelgeuse, Bellatrix and Rigel, are made visible in their relative places and magnitudes. The book explains how to find each constellation in the sky, based on season, geographical location, and time of night. *The Box of Stars* makes an excellent gift for someone interested in astronomy or mythology. □

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## TELEVISION

By Andrew Dowler

### Join William Shatner on the set of *Tekwar*, his newest SF series.



Greg Evigan stars as detective Jake Cardigan, in William Shatner's new SF television miniseries based on his popular *TekWar* books. **BELOW:** Shatner (with Evigan) guest stars as *Cosmos* Detective Agency owner Walter Bascom.

**W**ILLIAM SHATNER KEEPS BLOWING THE LINE. He's sitting in a stairwell rehearsing a scene from *TekLab*, the third of four *TekWar* TV movies shooting in Toronto's Cinevilleage, and something has his tongue raving all over his mouth. Greg Evigan, as detective hero Jake Cardigan, says, "If memory serves, you're the one who got me on this case in the first place," and Shatner, as Cardigan's boss, Bascom, is supposed to reply, "Then your memory should also tell you that convicted tek offenders are not permitted into England." What comes out instead is, "Your memory should remember...", "your memory should remind you...", "you should remind your memory..." and "mind what your memory remembers..."

But nobody gets tense. Shatner and Evigan joke a little and try out different line readings. Director Timothy Bond makes occasional remarks about context and settles bits of business with a word. Catherine Blythe, as android secretary Centra, seems sleepy—the whole film is a night shoot—while Eugene Clark, as Cardigan's partner Sid, eats his sub and stares into space like he's on another planet, except that he's right there

on cue, word-perfect every time. The cast is as serene as some old jazz band warming up for a gig and, after 20 minutes, Bond pronounces them ready.

But the lighting crew needs more time. Maybe Mr. Shatner has time for an interview? Nope. Mr. Shatner has time for a rest.

This isn't the typical big-star blowoff. Bascom is a small part, but *TekWar* is a big project—four movies shot back-to-back on a budget of \$5 million apiece—and Shatner's been at the center of it from day one. He wrote the original books, futuristic action/adventure novels centered on ex-cop Jake Cardigan and his battles with the mobs that control the illicit, addictive tek, a drug that preys on your self-deceptions. He's also the executive producer. He directed the first film and appears in all of them as well. He's been working hard on this since the summer of 1992, when Toronto's Atlantis Films persuaded him to take his novels to the small screen.

"Bill is Canadian and he's worked with us before, on *Ray Bradbury Theatre*," says Atlantis VP Jeremy Katz, "so he knew what we were about and what we were capable of." Atlantis has a 15-year history of series and miniseries, but it needed a partner for something this big. "Universal Television and MCA TV were putting together their Action Pack—24 movies for first-run prime time syndication. We fit into their plans, and they fit our need for someone who could guarantee significant financing. We knew these were going to be expensive movies."

Expense is something that director Bond watches closely. "In science fiction, preparation is the key. I work closely with the effects people and I always ask, 'How can we do this so that it's absolutely no problem for you?' It's a lot easier to do extensive preparation than to end up with costly and time-consuming rotoscoping because someone crossed the matt line. Most of *TekLab* is set in London, so we went over there and came back with lots of images. Then we found Toronto locations where famous London landmarks could be matted into the background. This means I can do a chase through the London fog where the cars are shot in Toronto and the backgrounds are in London."

Bond's long list of stage, screen and television credits includes the recent *Lost World* miniseries, plus episodes

of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *War of the Worlds*. He also has a degree in physics and chemistry. "I think it's a great background. Lots of science fiction is done by people with an arts background, people who can't program their own VCRs. I can keep the science accurate and impinging on the stories while I make peripheral points with it. For instance, I get to do a sequence where a 21st century cop chases kids in Arthurian costume through a dinosaur exhibit, three historical eras at once. That's the kind of thing I really like."

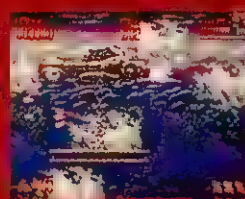
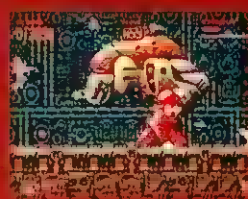




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*TekLab* offers a wild ride through post-revolutionary England. "They've had a revolution and dethroned the monarchy, and the rightful heir to the throne is in hiding with the Tek Kids, this group of street urchins who are the children of tek users. He's become their leader and managed to weld them into a coherent society by teaching them the principles of the Arthurian legend. But, because these kids are imaginatively challenged, they take it rather too literally. They steal the sword, Excalibur, and our plot is about getting it into the hands of the king."

The lighting crew is still pouring sunshine on the *Cosmos Detective Agency* set. It gives a pastoral feel to the neoclassical ivied walls and marble columns, which in turn, makes the furnishings jump with contrast. Wafer-thin computer screens are clamped to black Victorian wrought-iron frames that serve as desks. The operators sit in \$600 Italian designer chairs with attached palm controls.

"Mixing the old and new makes the new look very futuristic," says producer and production designer Stephen Roloff, whose designs include the series *Maniac Mansion*, *Friday the 13th* and *Beyond Reality*. Roloff is the prime architect of *TekWar's* look. "We're only 50 years into the future, so it's our world, but adapted for other uses. Resources are scarce and people are smart about energy and materials. We're creating a hopeful future and, around the edges, we're making small suggestions about how to address current problems."

"Architecturally, we're looking at existing buildings recycled for different purposes. That's an extrapolation from current trends. I took ideas from Archigram, a British group that's into clip-on, plug-in architecture. It's lightweight and adaptable, it's right for our future, and it lets me use existing locations. The *Cosmos Agency* exterior is a real place. It's in downtown Toronto and it really does have a neoclassical building nestled into the new one. Then we have the villain's lair, which is made up of three levels of moveable Japanese screens, so you get the sense of a constantly changing maze, where rooms can be added anywhere at any time."

Roloff's extrapolative approach has also given *TekWar* the 'morph mask' and the 'adway.' "Sony already has a flat monitor, so I thought, if flat, why not flexible? You pull the morph mask over your head like a balaclava and program in a new face, very handy for undercover work—until the glitches start popping. The adway comes from three sources: the \$1 million it currently costs to build a stretch of highway the length of a tractor trailer, which will be too expensive for governments in our future; the studies on magnetic stripping in highways, so that the road drives the car; and the advertising industry's big drive for new ways to reach the consumer (there are companies right now marketing the space over urinals).

"Put them together and you get a privatized walled highway lined with advertising—the



Cardigan and Beth Kittridge (Torri Higginson) watch an android melt down before it reveals the facts surrounding Cardigan's wrongful arrest and imprisonment.

adway. In turn, this gives us pedestrian areas in our city, which means we need fewer vehicles, which saves us a fortune."

Lighting is set and the actors start their run-throughs. It's your basic complicated master shot: Jake and Sid talk to Centra. Bascom enters, talks with them, and then Sid leaves. Jake follows Bascom across to the elevator. Bascom leaves in the elevator and Jake returns to talk to Centra. Technicalities are fixed, Shatner is word-perfect, and everything clicks along fine—until they hit the elevator doors. They're supposed to open automatically. They don't. "I've had lots of experience with doors that are supposed to open when you approach them," Shatner says.

"Yes, and I have lots of shots of actors walking into closed doors," replies Bond. There's a flicker of wariness in Shatner's an-

swering smile. He knows these doors and they are not his friends. They nail his nose on the seventh take.

"The technology is everybody's headache," says Evigan. "My personal demon was that damned gun, but any piece of equipment can kill you. On *TekWar*, Bill came over to me one day, and in this very confidential, very mystical voice, started to tell me about all the space we had for one key sequence, the close-ups of Cardigan on tek, 'Hours and hours,' he said, 'So you can get deep inside and really feel the part.' I thought, great. We got on set, they put the tek apparatus on me,—and the light doesn't work. That takes an hour. Then the tek chip won't fit in the slot. Then something else. By the end of it, Bill says, 'That's it. We've got to get this in the first take.' And I'm like, 'Bill, what about

## STAR TREK: THE SAGA CONTINUES

There's plenty of news (and closely guarded secrets) surrounding Paramount and its prize shows, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. Paramount Communications, Inc. recently announced the formation (with Chris-Craft Industries) of The Paramount Network, a fifth broadcast television network which will begin broadcasting in January 1995. The network will lead off with four hours of original programming over two nights, including the pilot for a new one-hour action/adventure series called *Star Trek: Voyager*.

Information about the new show is scarce, but rumor has it that the show will feature a Federation starship that makes a one-way trip through a wormhole and is stranded at the opposite end of the galaxy. The crew must conserve supplies as they navigate their way back to Federation space, presumably encountering new

worlds and new lifeforms along the journey.

The fate of the popular *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is currently the subject of ongoing speculation. The original plan was to end the show after the seventh season to clear the decks for a potential series of *Next Generation* movies and *Star Trek: Voyager*. But negotiations are said to be underway which might result in the renewal of the show for one to two more seasons.

Filming will soon begin on the first *Next Generation* movie, scheduled for release in December '94. For the movie, two time-travel scripts were considered, both incorporating cast members from the original *Star Trek* series. The one featuring a storyline that revolved around James Kirk was vetoed in favor of a script focused more on the *Next Generation* cast. In any case, the entire cast of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* has had their contracts renewed for two more years.



all that space?" "Forget the space, just do it."

On the ninth take, the technology works and Bond is very happy with the performances. Every *Tek* director has been different, says Evigan. "With any director, all the excitement is in the beginning. You both want to bring to the table what you've got and neither of you knows what that is. By the end, you know each other very well and you're ready for something new. On *TekWar*, Bill was excited. He really wanted to do the project and that gave him an incredible amount of energy. He always knew what he wanted, and because he's an actor, he understood our needs. George Bloomfield, on *TekLords*, admitted he didn't know a thing about the technical part of what we were doing, so he was all about the relationships between the actors and he had a certain style with lenses: lots of extreme close-ups where you could see the pores and what's behind the eyes. Tim is very open to working things out on the spot, ad-libbing and trying to add to what the writer wrote. It's a freer style—personally, I like it a lot. If the extras don't work, you can always take them out."

Evigan, who's starred in the features *Deepstar Six* and *Stripped To Kill*, TV series *B.J. and the Bear* and *My Two Dads*, and done Broadway musicals *Hair* and *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, sees Jake Cardigan as very much like himself. "We share what I call 'the good guys definition of things.' We're both more concerned with doing what's right than with acquiring wealth and power. Cardigan is a flawed good guy, though. He's headstrong,

**What happens when you can manipulate images so perfectly that you can't tell real from not real?**

*TekLords* and worked with Shatner on the story for *Tek Justice*. "Cardigan has been a tekhead, and tek plays into people's flaws and self-delusions, and that leads to another fundamental part of Bill's vision, the question, what is real? What happens when you get to the point where you can manipulate images so perfectly that you can't tell real from not real? That's part of what the android duplicates are about."

"Hey, can't have any fun without your exploding 'sims'," adds Evigan.

The movie format gives more scope to the vision than a weekly series, says Gindell. "Because they're movies, each one can have a different tone, but because they're coming out months apart rather than years, you can have more continuity. *TekWar* is fast action with lots of ground to cover. Cardigan comes out of prison. He wants to find his wife and son, but he's got to locate a missing scientist and deal with drug lords and try to clear his name.

"Cardigan is motivated by anger and the hunt for his family throughout *TekWar* and that gave me my drive for the character," adds Evigan. "In *TekLords*, he's found them and wants to get back together with them.

*Continued on page 79*

always on the edge of going the wrong way."

The flawed hero is part of Shatner's original vision, according to writer Morgan Gindell, winner of a Hugo Award with co-writer Peter Allen Fields for the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode, "The Inner Light." Gindell was one of the writers on

*Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* will continue pretty much status quo. I caught up with a few cast members to see what's going on. Armin Shimerman, who plays Quark, the Ferengi bartender, would like to see the show continue to deal with social issues and with elements of time and space. The latter "happens often on the other show, on *TNG*," he said. "We have a commitment to meeting new races because we're at the mouth of the wormhole, which is essential to our show." Noting that the static



Armin Shimerman plays Ferengi bartender Quark on *ST: Deep Space Nine*.

Gamma Quadrant called the Dominion, and I hope they develop that."

Siddig El Fadil, who plays Dr. Julian Bashir, the station's doctor and expert in multi-species medicine, agrees. "[The Dominion] is sort of being groomed for that, but I'd like it if they turned out to be more than just bad guys." His preference would be for the Dominion to be "much like Starfleet, both good and bad, in different ways." El Fadil would also like to see the

crew of the station come into contact, via the Gamma Quadrant, with "some truly different lifeforms, very much different from anything we've seen."

"Of course," he concluded, "that would be a very tall order for the writers."

Dan Perez

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## SCIENCE

By Beason, Haldeman and Landis

# A permanent manned U.S. space station is an idea whose time has finally come.



Advanced space stations will soon move from the drawing board to reality. Shown here is a NASA model of space station Freedom as envisioned in 1991.

ONE IMPORTANT FEATURE OF SPACE IS WHAT'S *not* there. Though the human race has been making brief forays into the heavens for decades, only one country currently maintains an orbiting space station. Why do we keep coming down to Earth instead of remaining in the heavens? Three scientists/SF writers with backgrounds relevant to this field recently met to discuss our seeming inertia.

Doug Beason served on astronaut Tom Stafford's commission to generate plans to go to Mars. He worked for the President's science Advisor at the White House under Bush and Clinton, and is the author of seven novels. His latest, *The Assemblers of Infinity*, is a Science Fiction Book Club selection. Joe Haldeman has written more than 20 books, most of them Hard SF. He was a charter member of the L-5 society back in the '70s, and keeps reminding NASA that it's time they put a writer into space. He has degrees in astronomy and English, and is a professor in MIT's writing department. Geoffrey A. Landis was a participant, along with others such as K. Eric Drexler, in the MIT seminar on space colonization in 1975, and has contributed numerous papers to the scientific literature on the subject since then.

**SF AGE:** Our first big goal in space was to orbit the Earth, and then to place a man on the moon. But now our main space goal from the perspective of the general public is an orbiting space station. How close are we to this? Where do we stand?

**HALDEMAN:** We're losing altitude. And attitude.

**SF AGE:** Who wants to give a brief history of our progress?

**BEASON:** Establishing a space station was put forth during the Apollo years, but the priority of getting to the

moon overruled funding it. Every president since Nixon wanted to do *something*, but never got the funds.

**HALDEMAN:** Jesco von Puttkammer, head of advanced planning for NASA in the '60s and '70s, assumed that we would have a space station some time in the '80s... otherwise we couldn't go anywhere.

**BEASON:** Eventually, when Reagan pushed it, the proposed cost was for less than \$10 billion, and it was believed to be achievable within a few years. But we've seen that balloon up to over \$40 billion, until Clinton said "enough is enough."

**SF AGE:** Why is it so important to us that we have a space station? What does it symbolize?

**LANDIS:** It symbolizes moving into space on a permanent basis, instead of going out as "campers". This has been the goal of the Russians for years.

**BEASON:** So the question is: Why do we need a station in the first place? It certainly is cheaper to do the science by other means (long-term shuttle, etc); manufacturing in space has not paid off out; even going up there purely for life sciences doesn't make sense, especially since we can use the Russian *Mir*.

**HALDEMAN:** I don't think we're talking about science, primarily.

**LANDIS:** I don't think we're talking about space colonies, either.

**BEASON:** The real reason for going out there is to provide a stepping stone.

**LANDIS:** People have been talking about utilizing the resources of space for years. Prospecting the asteroid belt has been a staple of science fiction since the '30s.

**HALDEMAN:** But I don't think this is what we're investing in.

**BEASON:** That's true, Geoff—but we've got to do it in a smart way. You should only use space for those things that we can't do on Earth (or must do in space).

**LANDIS:** In 1974, Gerard K. O'Neill had an interesting, radical thought. Up to then, people were mostly thinking about colonizing *planets*. His thought was, why do we need a planet? Can't we move into, and live in, space without relying on planetary surfaces? He had a lot of problems getting people to take him seriously at first. In 1974, he published a letter in the scientific journal *Nature*, and an article in the physicist's magazine *Physics Today*, setting forth the argument.

**HALDEMAN:** I've always thought O'Neill's plan was basically sound, if premature.

**BEASON:** You're right: It's only an engineering problem. Meaning, of course, that nothing says we can't do it.

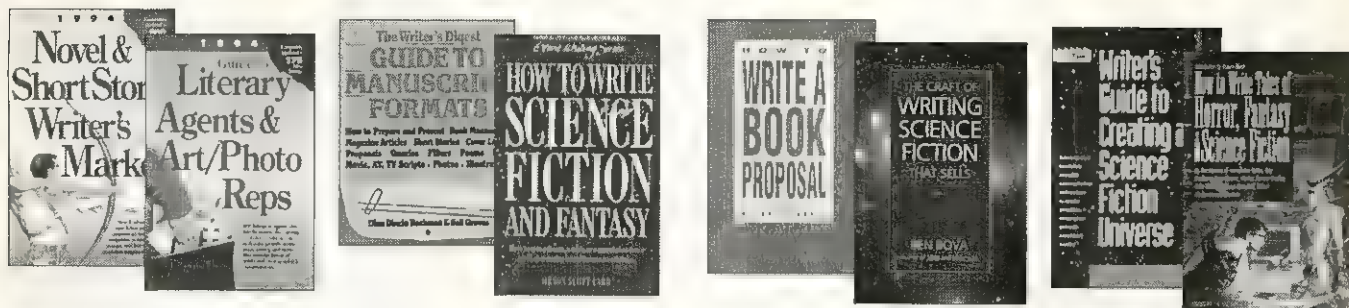
**HALDEMAN:** Gerard O'Neill thought the basic problem with the quality of life on Earth was that there was not enough wealth, and there was no way to supply wealth to poor nations without getting it from space. Wealth generated on Earth was limited by pollution and finite resources.

**BEASON:** Even more importantly, due to limits of growth, we've *got* to get off this planet, and a space sta-



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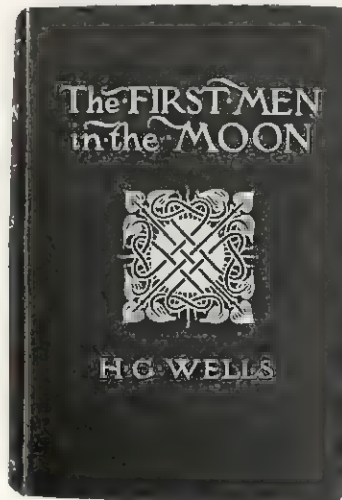
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tion is that first stepping stone.

**HALDEMAN:** Once we got outside, we could grow as much as we wanted—and people on Earth could piggyback on the growth of wealth in space.

**SF AGE:** But how do we convince people of that? All folks talked about from the last shuttle flight, for example, was the experiment with the decapitated mice!

**LANDIS:** We need to find the wealth, and make it clear to *everybody* that it's worth the investment to acquire.

**BEASON:** Maybe if we can show it's possible by doing it a little at a time—not by using the NASA "break the bank" method of going for the gold.

**SF AGE:** Please describe the basic stripped-down design for a feasible permanent space station.

**HALDEMAN:** For 5 million bucks we could get our foot in the door.

**LANDIS:** A foot in the door would be just a space station with pressurized volume, power, and life support.

**HALDEMAN:** The basic design is a pressure vessel connected to a life support system with high reliability.

**LANDIS:** From there we need to demonstrate the technologies we need to *stay* in space for good. Complete ecological recycling. Ion propulsion. Tethers. Prospecting the asteroids.

**BEASON:** Why do we need to spend billions on it? Skylab worked pretty well for a heck of a lot less.

**HALDEMAN:** A *Mir* size is a good start. Then you can add on to it in a modular way.

**BEASON:** But the bottleneck is still launch costs.

**HALDEMAN:** Skylab would still be in orbit if we had spent a little more money and put it higher.

**LANDIS:** Skylab worked well because they cancelled a mission to the moon to get the Saturn-V that launched it. But the Russian approach is a good one. Send up something a little bit at a time, instead of waiting until you have everything ready to go. Ultimately, though, a space station shouldn't be supported from Earth. It should be supported from space.

**HALDEMAN:** So maybe the question is how can we educate the American people out of requiring spectacular shows in space, toward getting satisfaction from slow and controlled growth?

**BEASON:** Geoff—If we're going to use the *Mir* model, then we've got to get the launch costs under control. No way we can afford to do it by spending \$1 billion per shuttle flight.

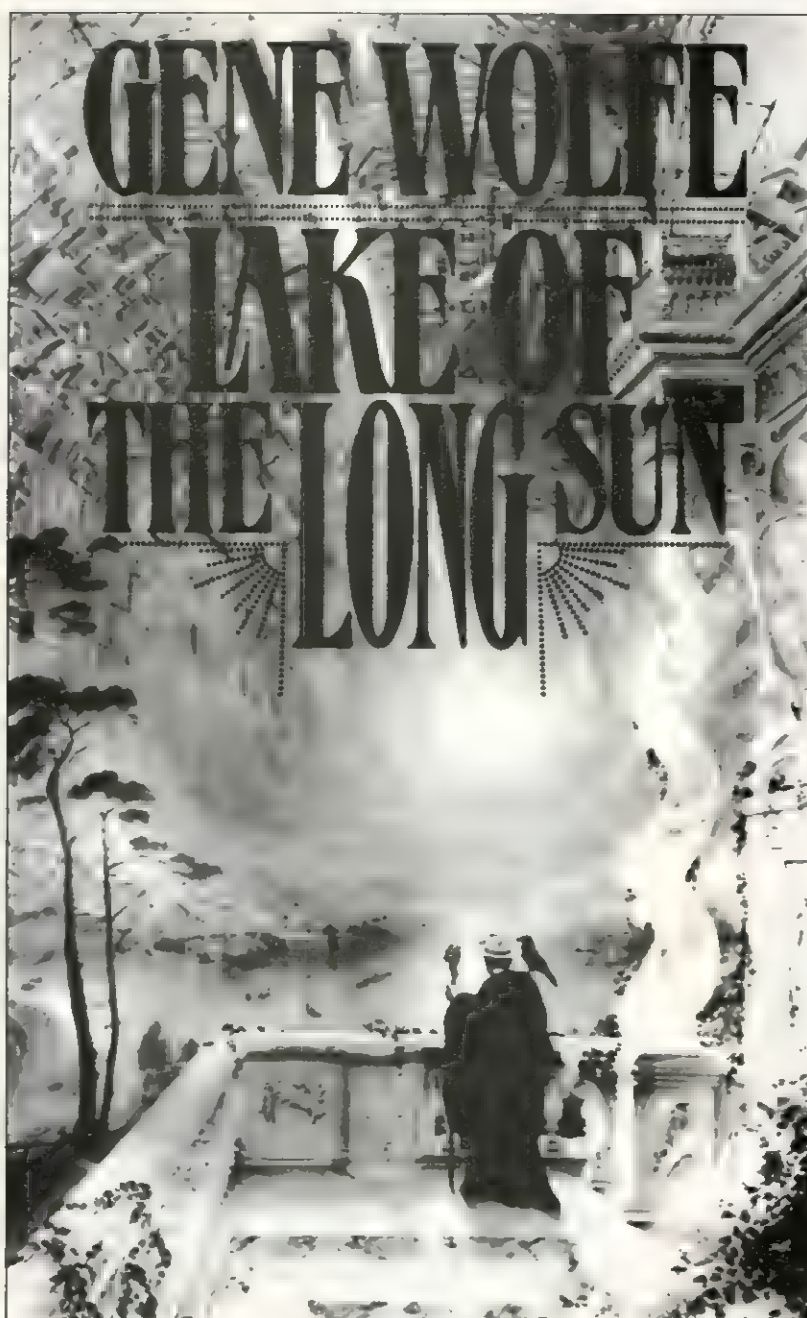
**LANDIS:** Not quite that expensive. For a budget of \$4 billion, it flies eight times. That comes to \$500,000,000 per flight. If you want to make it cheaper by amortizing development, fly it a lot. Which is what was originally proposed.

**BEASON:** One of these days we're going to have another explosion.



**GENE WOLFE**

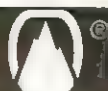
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**HALDEMAN:** Doug, the shuttle is dangerous and obsolete and is going to be out of the equation pretty soon. One more disaster and Americans are going to lose heart.

**LANDIS:** And upgrade the damn thing, instead of debating about it. True, Joe. On the other hand, keep in mind *any* new system will have a learning curve, which means failures at first. Believe it or not, the space shuttle has had the lowest failure rate of any launch system in history, American or Russian.

**HALDEMAN:** I'd be more in favor of slowly phasing it out—replacing manned shuttle missions with unmanned ones when people aren't necessary. If you yank out all the life support mass, you have a lot more payload.

**BEASON:** Speaking of life support, that's an important topic. *Any* space station is going to need protection from both solar flares and galactic cosmic rays. You can either design the heck out of it by going the brute force route, or you can do something smart.

**LANDIS:** The brute force way is to use a lot of shielding.

**HALDEMAN:** Doug, I get hit by cosmic rays all the time...

**LANDIS:** No, most of the cosmic radiation is deflected by the Earth's magnetic field. Down here, we're shielded pretty well. Most cosmic rays are stopped by the atmosphere, or else curve away because of the Earth's magnetic field. The only place where cosmic rays come in without being deflected by the Earth's magnetic field is the poles. Anything will do for shielding, but you need a lot of it—about 6 feet, if you want to shield from both solar flares and cosmic rays.

**BEASON:** The brute force method protects the astronauts/inhabitants by sending up a lot of mass. You'd need 2 cm of aluminum plus about a meter of water and a layer of paraffin to absorb the secondary cosmic rays. Another way to do it would be to build a "storm shelter" that the astronauts could bolt to in the event of a flare.

**LANDIS:** A "storm shelter" can shield you from solar flare protons, but it doesn't solve the problem of the "galactic" cosmic rays.

**BEASON:** Either way, the astronauts can only take 50 Rad total (NASA standards).

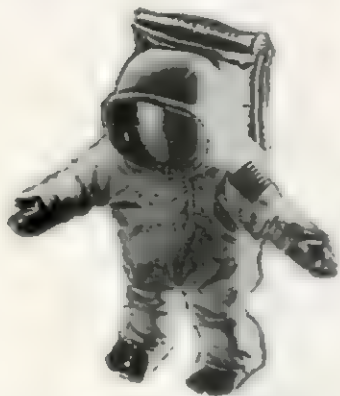
**HALDEMAN:** Maybe we'll just have to adjust to a higher rate of mutation.

**LANDIS:** It's not mutation you have to adjust to—it's cancer that gets you. Mass shielding may not be such a big problem, O'Neill calculated, that if you can toss lunar dirt into orbit from the surface of the moon with an electromagnetic catapult, and then catch it where you want it, you could pack it around your space colony. But an alternate and more elegant, solution, is to duplicate the Earth's approach: put a huge magnetic field around your colony to deflect the radiation.

**HALDEMAN:** Geoff, why not? Why not use a magnetic field?

**LANDIS:** I think it's a very good idea. Unfortunately, the smaller the habitat is the

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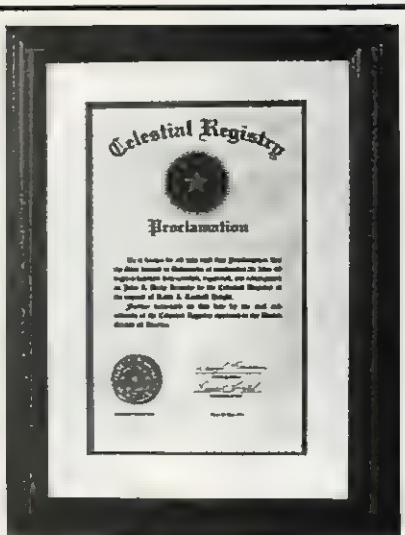
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more powerful the field has to be. It's beyond the currents possible in superconductors we know for small habitats—but it's fine for large ones (and superconductors are getting better).

**BEASON:** Another worry is the life support system: Food/water loops (are we going to make it closed or not?); power; air regeneration; and believe it or not, fungal/mold growth in the systems; along with bacterial overgrowth.

**HALDEMAN:** What you'll have is a kind of a takeout-dinner situation that will slowly be replaced by recycling of increasing efficiency.

**BEASON:** There are even more little details such as: do we keep things at atmospheric pressure? If we do, then any time the astronauts go EVA, they have four hours pre-breathing and four hours post-breathing. Despite what NASA claims, the astronauts can't work in spacesuits at sea-level pressures. That's straight from astronaut Tom Stafford—the reason is that the seals and joints simply are too hard to move in a constant volume suit.

**LANDIS:** Another reason you might want to lower the pressure is that nitrogen is very hard to find in the inner solar system (as is argon). Eventually, though, we may be able to get nitrogen from cometary ammonia.

**HALDEMAN:** But argon doesn't combine with anything. It can be recycled efficiently. I'm talking about small volumes like in spacesuits. Of course you want nitrogen in the atmosphere if you're talking about a plant biome.

**LANDIS:** But you would prefer to have your spacesuits at close to the same pressure as your habitat.

**BEASON:** One more item—psychological. Those people are going to need breathing space for their minds, so to speak. Living in close quarters like that for long periods of time can redefine the way we interact. For example, the Russians, after living in *Mir* for nearly a year, became overly territorial—to the point of almost tossing one of their comrades out the airlock. (Another Tom Stafford observation.)

**HALDEMAN:** The Skylab astronauts got testy, too, in much shorter periods of time.

**LANDIS:** On the other hand, the most densely packed regions of the Earth are places like Hong Kong, or Macao in the daytime. Hong Kong has 250,000 people per square mile.

**BEASON:** Maybe we should consider inflatable stations/modules ... or use the shuttle main tank, like David Brin pushes.

**HALDEMAN:** The shuttle main tank has to be used for something—it's really stupid design to throw it away.

**SF AGE:** Who has utilized space habitats in fiction and done it right? Figured all the ramifications out correctly?

**HALDEMAN:** Heinlein had an interesting take in *Friday* of a libertarian approach to

*Continued on page 80*

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## ESSAY

By Jack Williamson

# A long time ago, in a galaxy not that far away, Science Fiction was born.

Jack Williamson began writing science fiction before SF had a name. Earle Bergey painted this cover for the Summer 1944 issue of *Thrilling Wonder*.



OUR HUGO AWARDS WERE NAMED IN HONOR OF Hugo Gernsback, who has been called "the father of science fiction." Never really quite that, he did invent the term and founded the first successful science fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*. In April 1926, he began reprinting the classics of H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, and Edgar Allan Poe, as well as the more recent tales of A. Merritt and Edgar Rice Burroughs, which had been appearing in *Argosy* and a few other pulps. They were known as "different" or "unusual" stories, since the term science fiction had not yet been invented.

I discovered the magazine later that same year. I was 18. Growing up on isolated farms and ranches, I'd been taught mostly at home—perhaps not an actual handicap—with only two years of grade school and four in a rural high school. I had read Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee* and *Tarzan*, but this new magazine revealed dazzling vistas of space travel and time travel and new inventions and future worlds I had never imagined.

*Amazing* fascinated me totally. Still on the hard-scrabble farm, with no visible way to get anywhere else, I learned to use my uncle's old Remington typewriter and began pounding out stories of my own and mailing them to Gernsback. Most of them came back with rejection slips. In the summer of 1928, one of them didn't, a short story I called "The Metal Man." Passing a newsstand that fall, I recognized my metal hero on Frank R. Paul's luridly-colorful cover for the December issue of

*Amazing*. It was a moment that changed my life.

*Amazing* seemed to have been a sudden and rather surprising success, but it was still alone in the field, its contents still called "scientification." Gernsback invented the "science fiction" label later for *Science Wonder Stories*, the new magazine he launched in 1929, after he had lost control of *Amazing*.

A native of Luxembourg, he had come to America in 1904, the year he turned 20, with \$200 and a battery he had invented. When the battery failed to make his fortune, he began a mail-order business in electrical equipment and soon converted his catalogs into such magazines as *Electrical Experimenter*, brightening them with his own "scientification" works such as *Ralph 124C1+*, which are more interesting for their ideas and gadgets than anything else.

Though Wells had tried to warn us of darker futures, it was still easy enough, back in those brighter days before nukes and pollution, to believe in limitless progress to come. Gernsback believed, at least enough to profit from the gospel. New inventions were the engines of progress, and new gadgets delighted him; the one time I was at his office, he gave me a copy of a new magazine called *Gadgets*, which I never heard of again.

His magazines extolled the promised miracles of new technologies and told readers how to work electric magic in their own basement workshops. The first thing of mine he published was an editorial I called "Scientification, Searchlight of Science." Scientification, I wrote, was exploring pathways for the scientists who follow them to create "a new Golden Age of fair cities, of new laws and new machines, of human capabilities undreamed of...in a universe ruled by the human mind." Childishly naive today, the editorial won a prize from Gernsback's *Amazing Stories Quarterly*.

With the classic reprints used up, he needed new fiction but paid too little and too reluctantly to interest competent professionals. Few of them cared about science and things to come anyway. Luckily for me, his solution was to print the dreams of such young enthusiasts as I, beginners with more "sense of wonder" than literary skill. He took stories for *Science Wonder* and *Air Wonder*. I was suddenly a writer!

Other magazines appeared. The best for me, at least as long as it lasted, was *Astounding Stories of Super-Science*, edited by Harry Bates for the Clayton chain. Bates cared less about science than about story. Plus he paid two cents a word, a fabulous rate when compared with Gernsback, who paid his grudging half a cent only when I got a lawyer. Sadly for me, however, the Great Depression swallowed Clayton. He went bankrupt.

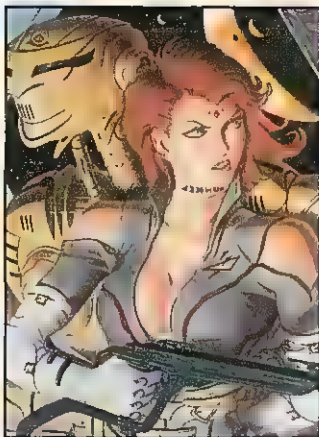
Yet *Astounding* lived on, revived by Street & Smith under F. Orlin Tremaine, another able pulp editor. He liked my work and paid a reliable penny a word, which was better than it sounds; a penny then was worth a dime today. Tremaine was followed by John W. Camp-

*Continued on page 86*

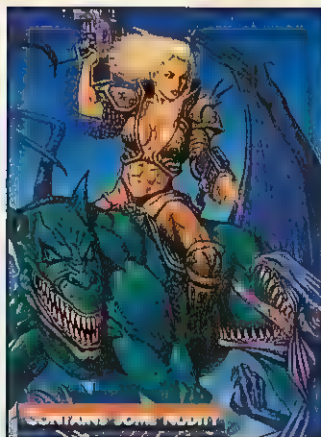


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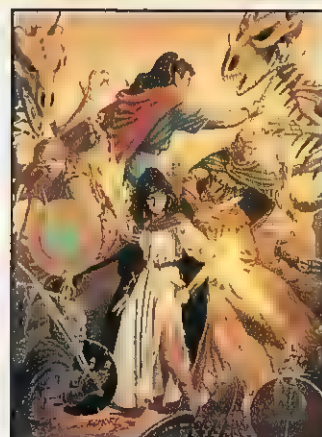
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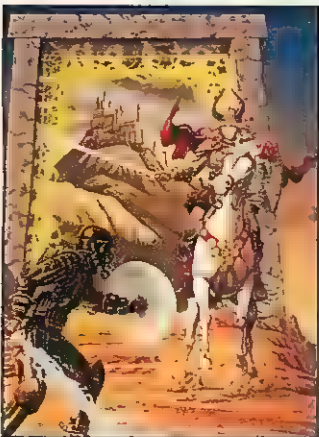
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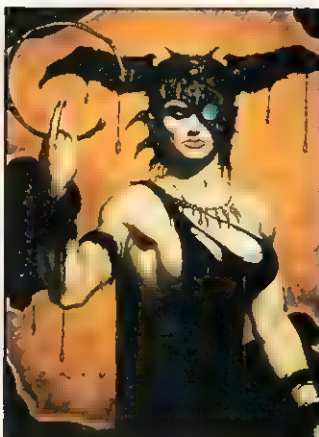
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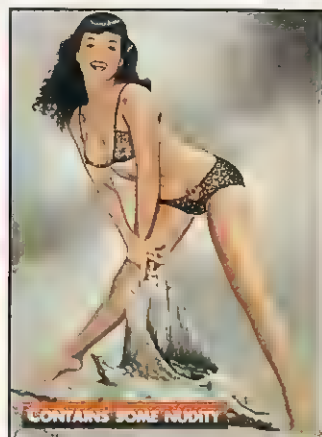
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Something was broken in Billy's brain  
so the scientists wanted to give him another.

# SIMPLE SOULS

BY RICHARD PARKS

*Illustration by Broeck Steadman*

Billy had to be awake during the operation. Dr. Carruthers had explained that part—at least she said she did. Something about putting another brain in his head. A little one. It didn't make sense, but that didn't matter. Poppa said it was a good thing to do and Poppa was always right. Dr. Carruthers said it wouldn't hurt, and so far she had told the truth, but Billy did wish he could scratch. Next to going to the bathroom, scratching was high on his list.

Billy lay flat on his tummy on a big silver table, and the silver bands clamped on his arms, wrists, and legs kept him from scratching. The big machine with its padded helmet and sharp little knives that pressed on him from above kept him from moving anything else. Billy decided to do what he could.

The shortest nurse's small nose wrinkled a bit at the smell. Billy wanted to say he was sorry, but his chin rested on the hard foam pad and he couldn't move his head back at all. Dr. Carruthers leaned over him; now and again Billy got a glimpse of the thing in her hands that looked a little like a knife and more like one of those space-weapon things in the comics he preferred. The thing made Billy nervous, but he decided he liked the way Dr. Carruthers smelled. Like his mother. He didn't remember much about her after 10 years, but he did remember that wonderful smell.

Certainly smelled better than he did. Why did doing your business have to stink, anyway? It's not like you could stop doing it.

"Almost done, Billy," Dr. Carruthers said. She hadn't said anything about his going to the bathroom; he wasn't sure she'd noticed, though it was hard for him to think how. She was leaning over him, twiddling the dials of the big machine overhead like Poppa trying to make the TV work right. Whatever she was doing there seemed to be all that mattered to her.

"Any sign of synaptic failure? Or could you tell with this one?"

Billy couldn't see him, but the voice was of that other one. Phister. He made Billy feel just like he did when the kids made fun of him, and if Billy didn't really understand what Phister was saying about him, he did know it was bad. Billy did not like Phister at all. He was glad it was Dr. Carruthers doing things to him, whatever those things were.

Dr. Carruthers sounded tired. "You know damn well we could tell with anything higher than a gerbil, Gene. Billy is certainly smarter than a gerbil."

Billy smiled. It was a nice thing for her to say, but he did feel sorry for the gerbil.

"When will the assimilation begin?" Phister asked.

Billy heard the sound of Dr. Carruthers snapping off her rubber gloves. There was a little blood there.

"It already has."

Billy heard the words but that was all; he wasn't even curious about them. The sight of his blood made his stomach feel like it was trying to turn flips, but he couldn't open his mouth, so at least nothing else was going to come out of him just then.

"Clean him up," Dr. Carruthers said to the nurses. "And get a sedative ready." She knelt down in front of the table so Billy could see her face. "All done, Billy. You're going to be fine."

Billy knew he was going to be fine. He remembered them telling him that at the beginning. He did wish, later, that she hadn't given him that shot. That did hurt, no matter what they said, and it kept on hurting until he suddenly got too sleepy to care.

Billy dreamed about Dr. Carruthers. She was explaining about the operation again. He and Poppa were sitting in Phister's office while Dr. Carruthers told them what they were going to do. Billy tried to listen better this time.

"...needed someone young for quicker healing. Naturally, there is some risk. We believe it's minimal, but naturally we need your permission to proceed."

"What is that thing, anyway?" asked Poppa. He didn't sound very interested, or at least not as interested as when Phister talked about money. Poppa had his whiskey voice on then, the one he used when he was drinking or thinking about drinking.



Phister brought out the model again. It was a little square about the size of one of those old puzzle boxes that Billy could never solve, but it looked like it was made of needles and string. "That thing," as you put it, is the first biological computer ever invented."

"Besides the brain, of course," said Dr. Carruthers. She was smiling, but Billy knew right away she'd said something bad about Phister.

Phister turned a little pink. "The first *synthetic* biological computer, then. And, in pure computational speed, it's a hell of a lot faster. But it's very difficult to interface to conventional electronic devices, and then there's the problem of memory storage and access."

"Inter what?" Poppa asked. Sometimes he didn't understand things, either.

"To hook together," Dr. Carruthers said. "The Bio-Comp uses electricity the way the body does, but it can't stand high voltages or generate phase-shifts fast enough. And we can't use it to help us solve problems if we can't talk to it. It can't gather information without the ability to read text and visual data, and it can't function without the ability to remember, to keep information. We're hoping Billy's natural senses can help the Bio-Comp with all that."

Phister stepped in. "Billy's diminished capacity was also in his favor, frankly." Billy remembered how Dr. Carruthers had looked at Phister then, but Phister took no notice. "A normal level of neural activity would mean more chance of interference with the Bio-Comp's synaptic interface." Phister grinned. "I doubt Bio-Comp will even notice Billy."

"It looks awful big to me," Billy said, looking at the model. "Is there room in my head?"

"Should be," Poppa said.

Phister smirked, and now Billy turned red, but Dr. Carruthers smiled at him and it seemed all right. "This is just a model, Billy. The real Bio-Comp is smaller than your little fingernail, and it's going to be attached to the base of the brain stem, just under where it comes out of your skull. There's room, don't worry."

"I don't understand any of it," Poppa said. "But you say it won't kill him and that's OK with me. Just pay me what you promised and I'll sign whatever you want."

Dr. Carruthers and Phister looked at each other kind of funny then, but they had the papers all ready. Billy watched Poppa sign, feeling... separate. The dream had been very real, even his own part in it, but now watching his Poppa, Phister, and Dr. Carruthers was just like watching television. Then the picture went away and Billy was left alone in a dark place. He looked around.

"Hello?"

There were brief flashes of light, there in the darkness, following the sound of his voice. Billy thought they looked like fireflies. After a moment they repeated, and the voice came back.

HELLO.

"You all right, boy?"

Billy opened his eyes. Poppa was there, and Dr. Carruthers. Billy started to say hello just as Phister came through the door carrying something that looked like a motorcycle helmet with spines like a porcupine.

"You're awake. Good." Phister set the helmet down on his head. They'd shaved him for the operation; there were pinpricks of cold metal touching his bald head all around. It made him shiver.

Dr. Carruthers turned to Poppa. "Mr. Neidland, would you excuse us, please? Mr. Phister and I need to discuss something."

"Sure. I need to be going, anyway. I'll check on you later, boy."

With Poppa, 'later' might be hours or days. Billy watched him go

a little wistfully. Dr. Carruthers was whispering to Phister in the corner. Billy tried not to eavesdrop but they weren't doing a good job of keeping their voices down.

"It's too soon," Dr. Carruthers said. She sounded a little angry.

"Too soon? How long have we waited already, Susan? Aren't you even the least bit curious about whether we've succeeded?"

Dr. Carruthers' name was Susan. Billy hadn't known that. He filed it away, somehow confident that he would not forget. He kept listening.

"... know I am, but the assimilation isn't complete! What if we put the synaptic interface under stress too soon? You don't know what would happen and neither do I. Suppose Billy dies? Do you really think the Board will give us another shot at this in our lifetimes?"

Phister didn't say anything for a bit. Then, "How long?"

"Three days, Gene. That's all. Your Nobel can wait that long."

Phister gave her a mean look. "Tell me you haven't thought about it."

Dr. Carruthers didn't answer him, but Billy thought she turned a little red. She came out of the corner and leaned over him. She still smelled good. "Billy, we're going to let you rest for a few days before we start any tests. Your father brought your comics and we'll bring in a TV this afternoon. I'll be in to see you every day until you're ready, OK?"

"I understand," Billy said. His lips got a little lost around the unfamiliar syllables, but it came out all right. Dr. Carruthers and Phister exchanged glances. Phister shrugged and lifted the helmet off Billy's head on his way out the door. After a moment, Dr. Carruthers followed him.

On the second night Billy realized he wasn't dreaming. His body was asleep, and his mind was playing pictures just like in a dream, but he wasn't doing it. Images flashed behind his closed eyes; memories mostly. Or at least things that had happened to him. He wasn't sure if he could call them memories, since he wasn't the one remembering.

"Show me what you're doing."

Billy watched the lights flash by, like a team of fireflies now. They fired, one after another, tracing a path from root to leaf as if they were perched on some invisible tree. Sometimes when the lights flashed he would feel things: pain, hunger, fear. Happiness, now and again. Joy. Sometimes words would spill out, and sounds, and things he didn't quite understand, all rushing at him at once like a litter of puppies. Best of all, sometimes when a light fired he would see the pictures. There was a pretty girl on the playground running away from him. There was Poppa and Momma together, arguing. There was Poppa drinking. There was Momma talking on the phone, crying. He tried to lean close, but he had nothing to lean with and he just could not hear what she was saying. Then the firefly lights backed away and the picture would fade, and the lights flashed off in a new direction.

"If I knew what you were looking for, maybe I could help."

Silence.

"Don't you know? I have that trouble sometimes. I forget."

FORGET. PLACES FORGET... EMPTY.

The other boy, for that's how Billy thought of the other presence, still had some trouble with words. Billy understood that. He had that trouble, too. Less so now; words seemed to be coming easier, but most of what Billy 'heard' from him wasn't really words at all, but pictures he'd borrowed from Billy with the little flashes of light. 'Forget' was Billy standing alone at the schoolyard. 'Empty' was the house after his Momma left.

"You mean places in the brain I'm not using? That's what Phister said."



SEQUENTIAL SEARCH. TOO LONG TIME.

And the picture was Billy rushing through the house, trying to find the bowl of ice cream he'd left somewhere. It was all melted before he remembered it was in the bathroom.

"I can show you where they are," Billy said, "but I want something back. That's fair."

QUESTION?

"I want you to keep finding the pictures. Find the places I'm using. Show them to me. I'll find the rest."

Another image—Billy in the schoolyard, giving his lunch money to Digger Smith so he wouldn't get beaten up again. Billy didn't much care for that picture, but it was clear enough.

DEAL.

Billy kept reading his comics. Usually after once or twice he would get tired of the pictures and the few words he understood and look for something new, but after the second day in the hospital something peculiar happened. Billy reread an old comic and noticed things he had never noticed before. He understood almost all the words now, words the other little boy helped him find in the lost places in his brain, but it wasn't just that. He noticed things in the pictures, too. The way Sonic Man looked at Miss Kyle, the spunky girl reporter. How the cord on the villain's telephone was in the wrong place. What was written in script at the top of Dr. Malevelo's fiendish secret plans on page 6 and how, combined with a recipe from Sonic Man's nosy next door neighbor on page 2, made a very neat riddle. Billy even knew the answer.

*How long has this been going on?*

Billy knew the answer to that, too. He wasn't sure how he felt about it yet, or even what it was, exactly. He'd have to remember to ask Dr. Carruthers about it. Maybe she would know.

Dr. Carruthers came promptly at 2 in the afternoon. "How are you feeling, Billy?" She smiled at him and immediately turned back to some papers she was studying.

"Fine. Are those about me?"

"Hmmm? Oh, in a way. They're about the Bio-Comp. Mr. Phister and I are going to give a paper on it soon, whatever happens."

Billy didn't quite know what the thing in his head had to do with giving away paper, decided it didn't make sense and he wanted it to make sense. "What do you mean, 'Give a paper'?"

Dr. Carruthers frowned. "Sorry, Billy. I meant we're going to tell some people about the Bio-Comp and you. Now, then—are you ready for tomorrow?"

"I guess so."

"Good. I can't stay long today; Gene and I will be back early in the morning."

"Doctor...."

Too late. Dr. Carruthers was out the door and gone before he could ask her anything else.

On the third night Billy gave the Bio-Comp a name, and, in return, the newly-christened BC led Billy to the storage places where the computer stored information about itself. Most of the information was visual; Billy

didn't understand the diagrams but felt that he might with a little more time and BC's help. That wasn't as important as the picture of BC himself—a matrix of polysaccharide rods and muscle fibers. BC even took time to explain what the little twitches of muscle meant, how the tiny distances the rods traveled translated into symbols at incredible speed, how the unit drew nourishment from the bloodstream just like any other part of his body.

BC was mainly interested in unused areas, but now and again he would go exploring through Billy's memories. Billy didn't mind. He was starting to look more and more at what BC was doing and fair was fair. There was still a great deal BC didn't understand.

*A simple soul.*

SIMPLE SOUL?

BC was listening, always. Sometimes Billy forgot. "That's what Poppa calls me when he's being nice. It means you don't understand a lot." Billy showed BC another memory, this time Poppa talking to one of the flower-ladies—at least they smelled like flowers—Poppa brought home now and again. Explaining Billy to her, telling how he'd been like this from birth. Poppa with his 'nice' voice on, worn like a new coat covering the holes in his shirt.

BC replied with a number. A '64' with so many zeros following it Billy almost lost count. Billy smiled. "You know a lot, but it's not the same thing. I know a lot, too."

YES.

Billy thought about what BC said, but not too long. He wasn't used to all the new activity and it still gave him a headache after a bit. He rested, but not too long a rest, either. BC went back to his browsing and Billy kept practicing BC's technique on his own hidden pathways, finding things hidden, forgotten. Trying to understand.

QUESTION. WHY DID POPPA LIE?

"What about?"

BC went back to the memory of Poppa and the flower-lady, and returned with a few of Poppa's words. BORN THAT WAY.

"I wasn't?"

BC led Billy to a new place, a place that held no light at all, no activity. It looked like a picture Billy had seen in an encyclopedia, one dark spot surrounded by stars. Billy recognized it as an old scar, around which the pathways were tumbled and twisted.

YOU WERE HERE WHEN I CAME. LOST. HOW LONG?

"I don't know." Billy was only beginning to understand how the way of tracing memories and recognitions that BC had shown him was changing him, helping him to understand, but none of that helped him here. Billy looked at the dark mass and had no answer.

"Maybe Poppa didn't lie. Maybe he didn't know."

TO TELL SOMETHING NOT CORRECT IS NOT A LIE?

"If you don't *know* that it's a lie, then it isn't. It's just bad information."

But it wasn't bad information. Billy started searching through the scarred paths and found the lie.

Billy found a memory of Billy at 6. He wanted to watch, but the damaged paths would not allow clarity. Billy found himself moving closer and closer relative to the memory and in another moment he was inside it. Seeing everything from a child's height and mind, living it again.

Poppa stood at the back door. He held his ancient Iver-Johnson cradled in his arms, and his eyes were red. Billy had never seen his father's eyes like that before.

"You forgot to feed the dog before you left for school." Poppa didn't say 'again.' He didn't have to.

"I'm sorry. I'll do it now."

Poppa shook his head. "Your Momma did that before she left."



Billy frowned. "Where did she go?"

Poppa didn't answer. "Call the dog, Billy." The shotgun looked huge in his hands. It had been freshly cleaned; Billy could smell the oil.

"What are you going to do?"

Poppa whistled. The white and tan beagle stuck his muzzle around the old potato shed but came no closer.

"Please... it ain't Andy's fault."

"You said please before and we got the dog for you. Then it was just one more thing for Momma to do, besides taking care of us. One thing too many. Now she's gone."

GONE?

Billy heard the strange new voice, but it didn't change what happened... what was happening. "Where is she? Where's Momma?"

"Gone. You're not deaf. Not stupid, neither. Do what I told you."

Billy closed his eyes. "Andy!"

The beagle came, wagging its tail. Poppa raised the shotgun.

Billy grabbed the barrel, tried to push it away. "No! You leave him alone! Andy, *run!*" Andy did no such thing. He just looked at both of them and wagged his tail again.

"Son, let go!"

THIS IS WHEN IT HAPPENED. Andy looked up at him. Billy saw BC in his eyes. "It's not Andy's fault! It's *your* fault Momma left! It's *your*—"

Poppa jerked the shotgun barrel out of Billy's hands, smashing it against the boy's skull. Billy felt the incredible pain only for an instant, then fell off the steps and lay, eyes open, staring out at the yard. Poppa didn't even look at him. Poppa shot Andy and the dog flipped backwards once and fell on its side, bleeding, quivering, then still. Its dead eyes were BC's eyes. Billy could not move, could not speak.

"Maybe that will teach you...." Poppa went back inside. He did not look at the dog again. He did not look at his son. Billy lay in the grass, his eyes fixed on Andy until the memory faded.

Billy tried to match the memory from the night before with the Poppa who appeared at his bedside that morning. He couldn't do it. The ruined man in front of him now was not the man who had killed Andy and crippled Billy's mind. That man was dead; only the body stood at Billy's bedside now, asking meaningless questions.

*That's when the drinking started. The day Momma left. The day I left. Poppa left, too.*

Billy wished he could tell that man that he was back, that it was over, but there was nothing left in the man beside his bed that would understand. Billy just smiled and pretended to be as he had been before until the man left. It was the meanest thing he could think to do. And the kindest.

Dr. Carruthers came in with Phister and his spiky helmet. Phister didn't speak. Dr. Carruthers smiled at him. "All set, Billy?"

"Dr. Carruthers, I'd like to talk to you about something."

"Certainly, but can it wait? We're a little pressed for time," she said, glaring at Phister.

"I guess so—"

"Fine, fine...." She was already pulling up the already short sleeve of his hospital gown. She swabbed his upper arm with alcohol and produced an already-prepared syringe from her lab coat.

"What's that?"

"We need to keep you quiet while we listen for the Bio-Comp," Phister said.

"I wasn't planning on making noise."

Dr. Carruthers was frowning. "Are you sure you're all right, Billy? You sound... strange."

"I feel fine," Billy said.

Dr. Carruthers shrugged and gave him the shot, then went to confer with Phister. Billy felt tingly all over, then numb. He watched with mild interest as Phister and Dr. Carruthers raised him up on pillows and set the helmet on him. Phister plugged a cable into the back of the helmet; the echo was very loud against Billy's ears. Phister fiddled with something on a small panel at the other end of the cable.

"Nothing," he said.

Dr. Carruthers peered over his shoulder. "No response at all?"

"See for yourself. There should be identifiable neural activity for the Bio-Comp, but all I see is Billy's."

"It's rather strong," Dr. Carruthers said, frowning.

Phister shrugged. "Like you said: he's smarter than a gerbil."

Dr. Carruthers glared at him. "You're a brilliant man, Gene, but sometimes you're also an incredible shit."

Billy was a little surprised to see Phister smile. "Sorry, Susan. Failure makes me cranky."

Billy wanted to tell them—especially Dr. Carruthers—that they *hadn't* failed, that BC was right there, but the drugs had all but immobilized him; he couldn't speak.

Dr. Carruthers rubbed her eyes, looking tired. "We need some more tests." She picked up the phone, said something Billy couldn't hear. Phister removed the helmet and a few minutes later some men came and got him and put him on another table inside what looked like a huge doughnut. He asked BC about it, but BC didn't know. He said it was because the information wasn't available in Billy's brain and gave Billy a number, the size of all the space left to fill. Billy thought of an infinity of empty rooms, gathering dust, crying out to be lived in. It made him a little sad.

*Can we do anything about that?*

YES.

When the men brought him back into the room Dr. Carruthers and Phister were conferring in low tones, staring at something on the table that Billy couldn't see.

Phister finally straightened, looking disgusted. "And we were worried about assimilation? Rejection? Billy didn't reject the Bio-Comp, he's damn well *eating* it!"

*Eating?*

"It's being absorbed, no question," Dr. Carruthers sighed. "Total incorporation is two days away, tops. Bio-Comp is an organic matrix; we knew this was a risk."

Phister shook his head. "It'll be like it was never there."

INCORRECT.

BC sounded emphatic, but Billy didn't need convincing. He wanted to tell Dr. Carruthers and Phister but he still couldn't speak. They left him there before the drugs wore off and they didn't visit him again. The next day he was released.

The address, like so much else, was in Billy's memory. It was a place he had been to, once or twice, but never saw much use for before. Now he did, and BC agreed.

*I would have told Dr. Carruthers or even Phister if they'd just asked me. Why didn't they ask me?*

SIMPLE SOULS, repeated BC for the tenth time.

*I know where to find them.*

WHEN YOU'RE READY, FIND THEM.

Billy was coming to respect BC's clarity of thought. It was one more thing he needed to learn, but it was coming to him. Everything was coming to him. He stepped through the doors of the remembered place and saw the walls and walls and rows and rows of books, all sorts, about almost all things. All waiting to fill the lonely, empty places inside him. □



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## P O M E G R A N A T E









Gam Oltenner was happy sandwiched between water and sky, until the day the stars threatened to steal his heart.

# THE RIVER'S TIME

BY MARK W. TIEDEMANN

*Illustration by Doug Andersen*

**T**HE MANASSA RIVER WINDS AN endless path through the hinterlands of Nine Rivers. The Winston Commune occupies a small, small bend of it a hundred clicks from the city of Charic and the Confluences. It was there, at Winston, where I first met Darny Caples and later learned one of the many meanings of homecoming. She stood on the crest of the slope just above the long warehouse by the wharf. Like all Returnist women, she wore a calf-length dress of drab brown homespun. What set her apart was the neatly wrapped bindle by her feet. She watched us maneuver our barge, *Leander*, into place against the wharf, with an expression of worried longing. She wanted out, a ride to Charic, maybe, but certainly away from Winston.

"Another runaway," my sister Rel said grumpily. No other people were in sight. Returnists have as little to do with the rest



of us as possible. They work their fields, grow kopfibre, corn, and other grains, bring the harvest to the warehouse, and leave it. The only cybernetic technology they allow for is the security lock on the warehouse that monitors who picks up the load, so payment—something they never shun—is guaranteed. I set our robots to work loading the holds and smiled at the girl.

Rel sighed. "I suppose you want to hire her? Just what we need is another cheap hand that'll leave soon as she knows what she's doing."

"Company's always welcome," Lor, my other sister, said.

Rel gave her a tired look. "Gam just wants to see if she'll touch with him, that's all."

"That's enough," I said. Rel and Lor had always been different, but since Mother had passed on it had gotten worse. Rel worried over money and timetables and grew more and more disapproving of anything resembling frivolity. Rel wanted to assume Mother's role, but she wasn't the oldest.

"Do I have to remind you what happened last time we hired someone on?" Rel asked.

"No," I said. "And it won't happen again."

"Two-thirds of our shipment sold out from under us—"

"I said enough!" I walked down the plank, onto the wharf, dodging a robot with a heavy load. So we'd been cheated, so what? We still had the barge, the river was long and wide, and no one was going to take it away from us. I was tired of Rel's nattering.

"Things would be different if *Leander* were all mine!" she called after me.

I walked up the path to where the girl stood. She eyed me suspiciously, but stood firm. "I'm Gam Oltenner," I said, extending my hand. "I guess you want a job?"

She nodded. "Darny Caples." She shook hands quickly. I felt callouses on her palms.

"Fine. We have to unload the warehouse, fill the holds, and head downriver. We're going to Charic." She nodded again. "You're hired. Talk to Lor, stow your things, and do what she says." I thumbed toward the barge. She nodded once more and hurried around me. She almost ran down to the wharf. Rel looked up at me with an angry glare and I smiled in return.

Lor had pulled off her shirt and was busy sorting bundles on the deck. Miller, our main coordinating robot, kept tally and redirected the servos according to Lor's directions. Lor was brown and muscular and the sweat gave her skin a silken sheen. She worked harder than any of us, as if she found sensual pleasure in physical labor. She stopped to talk to Darny, gave a couple of orders, then returned to her chores. Darny disappeared into the wheelhouse and returned to the deck without her bindle. She took over Lor's job so that Lor could go into the warehouse and oversee there.

My sisters are as physically unidentical as two sisters can be. Lor is luxury, smooth lines of hard muscle, small breasts, and her entire face smiles. Rel is muscled, too, but long and sinewy, large breasts, and a thin, too-serious face. Darny kept eyeing them nervously as the clothes were discarded beneath the twin suns.

I went down into the engineroom. In minutes I was covered in oil and grease, tuning the big motors, cleaning contacts, checking the various readouts. When I finished and came back up on deck, the loading was almost done. Darny sat beside Lor in the shade of the wheelhouse, sharing water. Darny's homespun was dark with perspiration.

**R**el was finishing the last of the paperwork in the warehouse when the committee from Winston appeared over the ridge. Darny's face went white and Lor frowned. I walked down the ramp, not bothering with a shower, and went to meet them. There were five—three men and two women. The leader was a heavyset man with a thick white mane of hair and a thin wisp of beard.

"Good day," I said. "I'm Gam Oltenner, bargemaster of *Leander*. What can I do for you?"

"I'm Sage Mendolson," the leader said. His voice was heavy and calloused, like his hands. "I am Speaker of Winston. We want a young girl name of Darny Caples. Is she here? Have you seen her?" He glanced past me to *Leander*.

"We just signed her on as crew," I said.

"We would have her back. She has no business here, with you. You'll return her to us."

Rel stepped up beside me, wiping sweat from her face with her shirt. The women blushed and Mendolson narrowed his eyes at Rel. Rel said, "We've already signed her on. We need the extra hand and you have no authority to break contracts."

"Understand," Mendolson said, looking at me, "we want no trouble with you. No quarrel. But what's ours is ours. Darny is ours. She's underage to begin with."

*THE PIRATE CAME from behind the rock.*

*It was a black, ominous boat with armor plate,  
and it moved so fast that it was almost on us...*

"I'll need to see proof of that," Rel said. "State birth records or even a parental genesis profile would do. Registered, of course."

"We don't keep such things," Mendolson muttered.

I smiled. "Then we can only assume she's the age she says she is and liable for her contracts."

Mendolson looked uncomfortable. "We'll...pay you for her. Or give you a replacement. Someone to take her place."

I glanced back at Darny, still beside Lor. I was intrigued now; I'd never heard of Returnists bartering like this. I hoped Rel was as curious as I.

"A contract is a contract," Rel said. She turned away and headed back to *Leander*. I grinned after her.

"Man, do something!" Mendolson said.

I looked at him blankly. "Rel's my supercargo and handles all our contracts. She's the business mind, not me. What she says about contracts I listen to. I'm curious, though: what's so vital about her?" Without answering they all turned around and strode back up the hill. "Remarkable," I murmured, then returned to *Leander*. We secured the hatches and left the wharf in mutual silence.

**D**arny kept looking from one to the other of us with the worried face of a child who can't tell where her scolding will come from. Out into the main current, Lor went to her and took her belowdecks to settle her in. When she reappeared on deck she wore worktogs and looked uncomfortable in them. I asked Lor later if it was much trouble getting Darny to change clothes. "Had to threaten to knock her down and strip her myself," Lor said. "A body can't leave something and still hold onto it."

Lor tossed the homespun into the river. With so few on a barge routine emerges almost automatically. Darny ended up doing assigned drudge work until she learned more, which she did stotically. Cleaning, cooking, hauling, then taking readings on the automated equipment, doing soundings, sitting watch by the comm. She learned fast. We were all eager to show her how things were done, even Rel. Just among the three of us we could afford to be lazy—Miller took care of a lot—but with new crew we competed to impress.

"Where are you bound?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Charic, I imagine. I've never seen the spaceport." Rel shot me an I-told-you-so look. I scowled at her, covered my expression with a drink.

"Our brother Hil went there," Rel said. "Caught the fever in the worst way and next thing we all knew, he was booked on a starship for Time knows where." She shook her head. "Broke Mother's heart."



"He'll be back," Lor said.

"Maybe," Rel said. "But for what? He won't be the same."

Darny lapsed into silence after that. On the fifth day out from Winston we passed debris. Planks, plastic tubing, panels, then a body. We followed the trail until we found the husk of a gutted barge jammed against the shore.

Burns and splinters covered the decks. Lor took Darny aside and began showing her how to handle a pike. Darny was awkward at first with the 3-meter-long shaft and regarded the hooked end with awe. I checked my rifles and Rel her pistols. Miller prepared the mortars on the bow and loaded them with grapples and chain shot. We went through a drill a few times, buttoned up *Leander*, and waited. Rel took stims to stay awake through the night. We huddled in the wheelhouse, staring at the dark banks of the Manassa.

Darny slept in a corner, finally, after trying to maintain with Rel. This far along the river there was sparse traffic. Nine Rivers had been settled for nearly a century, but still little of it had been explored, much less occupied. The huge octopus of a river system provided kick upon kick of shore for settlements but most were still concentrated around Charic, where the three largest rivers came together. A few, like the Returnists, settled as far away from the main colony as they could without being cut off. Still, there were less than half a million people on Nine Rivers.

**D**awn came in violet shades that made the waters look like wine. We approached a column of rock that jutted out into the river. My skin tingled looking at it. I looked at Rel and she nodded. I nudged Lor and she stretched sleepily, then fixed on the rock. We all felt it. Darny roused and nervously stayed out of our way. The pirate came from behind the rock. It was a black, ominous boat with armor plate, and it moved so fast that it was almost on us before we could do much. On sonar I saw a sandbar ahead, hugging the shore. I cut across the pirate's path and made for it. Shots ricocheted off the deck. As we rounded the bend they made an attempt to grapple us.

I ordered Miller to be ready with our own mortars. My stomach was a hard lump and it seemed like I hadn't blinked in minutes. Suddenly I turned hard to shore, right for the sandbar, and the pirate began to sheer away. Miller fired the mortars. The grapples caught, one of them slamming through the loose plates on the quarterdeck. Miller reloaded quickly and fired again. *Leander* lurched as the pirate pulled the lines taut. "Take the wheel!" I said, and grabbed my rifle. I sighted on their deck and when one appeared in order to cut the lines, I shot. Rel gunned the engines. *Leander* is a deep river tug and her motors are powerful. The pirate was a converted explorer and overweighted with armor. Miller fired another set of grapples.

I kept up a constant barrage of rifle fire and gradually we began to win the tug-of-war. We skittered over the sand, but *Leander* is flat-bottomed and even with full holds it sits high in the water. We cleared the sandbar and pulled the pirate after us. Lor laughed maniacally and cheered. Darny stared wide-eyed. Before the pirates could do anything their keel was buried. "Look at the bastards flounder!" Rel yelled. Miller released the grapple lines and we surged away. Rel brought us to a stop, picked up another rifle, and joined me sniping at them. "We should go back and attack," Rel said.

"What?" I gasped.

"They're pirates! They'll get off that bar eventually and jump somebody else!"

The water churned beneath the pirate. We stopped shooting and watched. Three big tentacles emerged and enveloped the boat. The crew abandoned ship, swarming over the deck and leaping as far from the boat as they could. The river squid slowly crushed the foredeck. Other tentacles caught men in the water. They screamed only briefly, crushed a moment later. We sniped at the survivors. The

squid broke the back of the boat and fed. Its great body surged up out of the sandbar and then moved on. Rel steered us out of its way, but it seemed sated and uninterested in us. In minutes we had killed the few survivors. Darny was white and stunned. The wreck was still on the sandbar, pathetically burst open like a nutshell. Rel moved *Leander* close to it.

"Let's see what's on board," I said.

Rel frowned. "I just want to make sure there aren't any more pirates. I'm not interested in their loot."

"We could use it, though," I said and she glared at me.

**I** took Miller and Lor. We carefully explored every cabin, but there was no one left aboard. The hold was taking water, but we still managed to salvage a lot. Miller torched open the safe and Lor selected the best from an ample arsenal of rifles and pistols. The safe was half-filled with credit chits and scrip, plus a strongbox full of pharmaceuticals. Miller patiently removed it all back to *Leander* on the skiff. There was little in the larder. They had been foraging for food among their prizes. We were well away from the wreck before Rel came to examine our salvage. She shook her head.

"Dead man's booty," she said sourly. Then she started going through the credit chits. "Seems fate is on our side. Looks like they were planning to retire. This should take care of all our debts."

"And some left for pleasure," I said.

"Look at the drugs," Lor said, her eyes bright.

Rel studied the strongbox. She frowned and pulled out a lading chit. She slipped it into a scanner. "This was being shipped on *St. Galen*." No one spoke. I stared at the open box of neat little vials. *Leander* had run many races with *St. Galen* and we thought highly of Bargemaster Tomlin. Nine Rivers is a big world and the rivers seem at times to be the entire universe. You find all too few lifelong friends.

"We'll sell the drugs," I said, "and give the money to their survivors."

"They carried all their people with them," Lor said. "We could give the money to the guild disaster fund."

*THE RIVER SQUID slowly crushed the foredeck.  
Other tentacles caught men in the water. They  
screamed only briefly, crushed a moment later.*

Rel slammed the lid on the box. "We'll use the money ourselves. It's too late for *St. Galen* now."

I didn't know what to say. Lor's eyes widened slightly, then she grunted. "There's a shrine to lost boats in Chester Cove. We could buy a monument to *St. Galen* there."

Rel glared at her. "We have problems of our own. The money is ours. Tomlin would understand."

"You're a real kraken, Rel," I said. "Who appointed you bargemaster?"

"We might do better if I *was* master!" Rel bellowed. "I'm not the one who hires worthless help that gets us in trouble with the banks!"

I looked at Darny. She stayed near the hatch, hugging herself and looking frightened. "What do you think?" I asked.

She frowned, uncomfortable, but said, "The money isn't yours. Shouldn't it go to someone who needs it? Orphans, maybe."

Lor grinned. "We're orphans. I guess we can keep it then."

Darny reddened. "You're making a game out of it. Don't you respect the dead? What about the people these things belong to?"

Rel drew a deep breath. "The company shipping the drugs has probably already collected the insurance money. The people who bought the cargo have already been reimbursed since *St. Galen* obviously didn't deliver. Nobody so far has lost anything. On the other hand we have banks after us that want to confiscate *Leander* to pay debts. We were cheated by a hired hand whom I will personally skin alive if ever I catch him."



"It's true," I said. "If I hadn't slipped out of the dock at Downer's Landing we wouldn't have *Leander* anymore. Banks aren't very understanding, especially not offworld franchises."

"But the money still isn't yours," Darny insisted. The argument continued. Rel grew hot and threatened to toss Darny over the side for the river squids and krakens if she didn't drop the subject. Lor put her arm around Darny and told Rel it would be a waste to throw

*I PUSHED HIM back and drew my pistol.  
I leveled it at the leader's nose. Darny and Rel  
appeared on their flanks then with rifles.*

such a scrapper into the river, especially after she'd stood up to Rel. I started laughing.

Both Lor and Rel ganged up on me, demanding to know what was so damn funny, and maybe I should be the one thrown overboard. I headed for the hatch. Lor tackled my legs and I sprawled in the gangway. Rel and Lor hoisted me up and carried me to the deck. Darny followed, crying at them to be careful, what were they doing, please stop—"I'm master of this barge!" I yelled. "You better put me down, damn you!" They rushed to the edge and threw me into the Manassa. I came sputtering to the surface and saw Darny looking frightened, Lor doubled over in laughter, and Rel grinning viciously. Miller moved one of the cranes around to pick me up. I was set dripping on the deck. "Ditch me, will you!" I shouted, and grabbed Lor. She tried to twist out of my grip, but I spun her off the deck, into the river. Rel crouched to grapple with me, but I ducked under her arms, hoisted her onto my shoulder, and hurled her off the deck.

"Oh!" Darny cried. She danced in place for a few seconds, then jumped in after them.

"Miller! Darny first!" Miller moved the crane arm after Darny, who clearly had problems swimming, and fished her out, then rescued my sisters. Dripping wet, we sat together on the deck laughing and stripping off our clothes. Even Darny took off her shirt and pants and sat there self-consciously covering her breasts with her arms, laughing nervously with us.

**A**s evening came on, Miller and I removed the coverplate to the firepit in the foredeck and I lit a fire. Lor added sprigs of tallowood and the scent enveloped us as we sat around the blaze, watching the sparks sail heavenward to the stars. "That's where I want to go," Darny said quietly. "The stars."

"Lords, why?" Rel asked.

"I'd love to see other worlds," Darny signed.

"Hm," Lor said. "Seems Nine Rivers is big enough, and most of it unexplored. Most everyone lives on the rivers. I want to be a great explorer, like Kanel was. Fifty years ago he went all the way to the headwaters of the Trilon River, then on to the north pole."

"Not much profit in such exploration," Rel said.

"No," Lor agreed, her eyes bright, "but people would tell stories about me for centuries."

Rel grunted. "I want to own my own fleet someday. That's my dream. Maybe even a spaceship to carry Oltenner trade to other systems."

"Rel got all the money lust from Mother," I said.

"Would you captain a starship yourself?" Darny asked.

"Lords, no! I'd own it, I'd say what it would carry and where it would go, but I'd hire people already sick with the wanderlust to fly it. You'll never get me on one of those things. They steal your mind, rob you of purpose, you get wanderlust magnitudes worse than Lor has it! No starships for me! One Oltenner is enough to have out in the vacuum."

Darny shook her head and looked up. "Still, that's where I want to go."

"She's already got it," I said. "Nine Rivers is a big world. Seems more than enough place for anyone."

"But it's common. I don't like it," said Darny.

"How would you know?" Lor asked. "You've never been outside the boundaries of your commune. Had you ever seen a river squid before today? Or pirates?"

"No river squid. We've heard the shots of pirates, but they never bothered us." She shrugged. "I don't know. The stars seem more...more...."

"Nearer to the soul is what Hil used to say," Rel snapped. "Whatever that means."

"It means," Darny said softly, "that we have souls bigger than our bodies, bigger sometimes than the worlds we're born on. Some people have to find the limits of their soul. Sometimes they have to go to the stars for that."

I stared at Darny thoughtfully. Hil, when pressed for his reasons for going, hadn't been able to say anything that clear. He didn't know. Mother was dead, he'd said, and there was nothing to hold him to Nine Rivers. It had all sounded like flotsam to me then, but now I wasn't so sure. "What are you running away from?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't want to talk about that."

"Don't be so blunt and nose-y, brother," Lor said.

"You like me blunt and nose-y, sister." I pointed an accusing finger at her. "There was a time when—"

"Don't you talk about that!" Lor shrieked. "Let me tell you some stories about dear Gam here...." She brought things up that made us all howl with laughter at my embarrassment. We talked a long time and fell asleep on the deck.

**T**he small town of Taylor Cove was two days away, and beyond that lay Charic, where the Manassa, the Trilon, and the Cario all meet. With the provisions we'd recovered from the wreck, I decided we didn't need to stop at Taylor Cove. Last time we were there, the self-styled and titled harbor-master tried to fine us for so-called infractions in the barge code. He'd had 10 armed men to back him up. We tried never to stop there anymore. Charic was where I wanted to go. Our bank was there. We could deposit the money and use our broker to sell the drugs as well as market our kopfibre. Charic was full of excitement, with places to go and things to do that the river couldn't give you. Rel came onto the bridge in the morning wearing her serious expression, looking very much like Mother. "Darny never said last night why she left Winston," she said.

"She wants to go to the stars. I've heard that one before," I said.

"Don't be blind. You know and I know that Returnists dream a lot but never do anything unless prodded. I thought sure last night she'd tell us what prodded her."

"Lor stopped her," I said.

"She changed the subject, that's all." On deck Lor was showing Darny something about one of the robot arms.

"Maybe she doesn't want us to know," I said. "I don't know that much about Returnists, except that they wish to return to the primal beginnings of humans. Something about the time when mankind stood between agriculture and technology being the purest we've ever been."

"They don't like machines, leave it at that. Philosophy doesn't interest me, but the way they treat themselves and outsiders does. Lords, I'm mighty curious about why they came to get her! Returnists don't barter like that."

"So go ask her. She can only say no," I said.

Rel sighed, exasperated. "I don't see how you got to be barge-master. You dream too much, pay attention too little."

I smiled at her. "My charm." She made an impatient gesture and left the bridge. Maybe one day we'd wake up to find Rel gone. She wanted to command, to run things her way, and it irritated her that Mother had left mastery to me. I'd have turned it over to her except



that I didn't want to work as hard as Rel would push us. I was curious about Darny, too. But I figured that the truth would come out on a better day.

**W**hen we came to Taylor Cove there was a problem to distract us all. The good citizens had erected a lock across the river. I shuddered at the sight, the obstruction, something artificial standing in the way of the river and the river's people. Already three other barges were docked. I recognized the *Ecclesiastes* and radioed her to find out what was happening. Old Esther, bargemaster of the *Ecclesiastes*, told me that most of the barges had been bypassing Taylor Cove because of the harbormaster and the town was losing revenue. They built the lock and were now committing robbery by mandate. A tariff, they called it, paid just for passing by. We were ordered into the fourth chute. Four townsmen came aboard, armed, to inspect us. Lor and I met them at the bridge hatch.

"You can levy a straight tax," I said, "but you don't set foot below."

They smiled and the leader pulled out a set of papers. "We've got the authority," he said, shoving them at me. I pushed him back and drew my pistol. I leveled it at the leader's nose. Darny and Rel appeared on their flanks then with rifles. "This isn't legal," the leader said.

"You're absolutely right," I agreed. "You stay on board till we're through the lock." Lor and Darny collected their weapons. Miller tied them on the foredeck and I radioed the harbormaster's office to let us through.

"Where are our inspectors?" the harbormaster demanded.

"Right where you and I can both see them," I answered. "Out in the open. Let us through and you can have them back."

"Go ahead and kill them. You'll all be murderers. Then Charic will send police," the harbormasters shrieked. I didn't answer. We waited in silence. After an hour the gates opened and I powered

bloodlust. We hadn't killed anyone else, saving our fury for the harbormaster. He was the cause, the cancer. We forced our way into the house and fought from corridor to room until we found the harbormaster in the bathroom. He looked like some greasy animal with small eyes and he bared his teeth at us. I shot him in the face and he slumped against his sink and died kneeling.

The locks were gone and the town burned. We ran through the streets shouting in triumph. Someone found a tavern and brought out boxes of liquor. I found Lor, naked to the waist and covered in sweat and black cinders. She laughed insanely and hugged me. She smelled of smoke and musk and her eyes were wide and fevered. I left her and went back to where the locks had stood and found only barges.

Darny danced on the edge of *Leander*. I raised my arms and screamed and heard her echo me. She shook her head and swung her fists at the night sky. I had a bottle of brandy and jumped aboard. Darny choked on the first drink, but then managed it and laughed. Brandy ran down her neck and I licked it off. She kissed me and laughed and drank more. The town looked like a bonfire. Darny took me back to her cabin and washed the blood off my arm and wrapped the wound in gauze. She undressed me, then pulled her own clothes off and shoved me to the floor. We made love as though racing with time. She was a virgin and I tried to be careful, but I hurt her. She pulled back for a moment, then reached for me again, and we slowed down this second time, found a pace closer to the river's time, and flowed liquidly against and into each other. Afterward we held each other there on the floor. We slept a short while and when we woke, the fury had waned. Darny seemed hesitant to try again, but I began exploring her body and soon her reticence faded. We laughed together, which is the best kind of lovemaking, playful and deep at the same time.

"I'm glad it finally happened," she said then. "I'm free now. I dreaded when it would come, but I'm glad it did." She laughed again and kissed my throat. "I'm glad it was with you." She rolled off me. "Stand up. I want to see you." I pranced comically before her, mocking the costume models I had seen in Charic. She blushed at first, but did not take her eyes from me. Then she giggled.

"What's funny?" I asked.

She pointed. "How—how can a man walk with—with all *that*!" I looked down at myself and laughed. She laughed with me and I reached for her again. Her body was strong

and sleek. She held me back, though. "No, Gam, I want to talk." I sat down and waited. She chewed her lip and looked worried. "Do you know anything about Returnists?" she asked.

"What everybody knows, which probably isn't true," I replied.

"There's too much to tell at once. But the thing to keep in mind is that we—*they*—are committed to the earth. Farmers. Farming is a holy cause. One of their beliefs is that every few years the richness of the earth must be blessed or we could—they could suffer famine. God's displeasure. So there's a ritual. One girl is appointed to be the Seedbearer. She has to be young and a virgin and she's instructed in how to behave and what to feel. When the time comes, she's shared by all the men of the commune."

She was quiet for a long time then. I was holding my breath. Finally, I asked, "Do they kill her in sacrifice then?"

"Oh, no!" She looked horrified and I regretted the joke. "No, they wait to see if she's pregnant. If she isn't, then the ritual happens again and again until she is."

"Then god is happy? Sounds like an unsound god to me. I take it you were the next Seedbearer?" She nodded. "And you left because of that? Do I frighten you?" I asked.

"No, but this is different," she said.

I nodded, thinking I understood. "I can see how being passed around by a hundred men would be disquieting." She looked at me strangely and I knew I'd made an error.

Suddenly she started crying. "You don't understand. I didn't believe in it! I didn't have faith! It would have been wrong of me to

*THE NIGHT WAS filled with the tatoo of guns and the crackle of burning. I screamed with rage. People ran from us; the town was in chaos.*

*Leander* through. When we were a few hundred meters farther on, Miller untied them and we threw them overboard.

Around the bend, out of sight of the town, we found a gathering of barges. We pulled in among old friends and strangers, all sharing an angry face. Bargemaster Dalen stood on the prow of his barge, the *Minnetot*, addressing the families. "What they're doing is piracy by any other name!" he said. "But worse than that, they're blocking the river! Nobody blocks the river, not even Charic!"

"Charic is another four days off," Rel said. "What do you intend to do about it?"

"It's got to stop. If Charic can't—or won't—then we have to," Dalen said. "It affects us anyway, it's our problem."

We waited for night. We had 15 barges and a low simmering rage in common. Rel and Dalen came up with a plan. Fifty of us went ashore armed and marched to Taylor Cove through the woods. The barges came back upriver to the locks. At midnight we struck. The town slept and wasn't prepared. We ran screaming through their streets, shooting into the air and rousing people from their homes. We torched the warehouses and other official buildings. The night was filled with the tatoo of guns and the crackle of burning. I screamed with rage. People ran from us; the town was in chaos. A hideous creaking almost drowned the roar of the fires. The barges pulled the lock apart. The timbers snapped and sections of it floated free.

I led the rush on the harbormaster's house, which rose up behind the harbor offices. His men shot at us from windows, and a few of us died. I took a bullet in the arm but I didn't notice through the



go through it and not believe in it!" I held her while she cried. After awhile she slept. I held her until morning.

In the morning Darny showed me her personal things. She unrolled her bindle and spread out a collection of curios. There was a holograph of two people in simple dun clothing—her great-grandparents, who had been on the first colony ship from Earth. The image was a Directorate passport, which was the only way such an image could have been made of them. She also had a flashsketch of her mother. She was a tired-looking woman, but strong, with clear, direct eyes like my mother's. Darny had a gold and emerald brooch she said had been in her family for ages. There was a pair of rough leather gloves—her first harvest gloves. Two things completed the collection. The first was a fan, painted with a sapphire and gold dragon. An aunt, older than her mother, had run off as a girl and on her one visit back to Winston had brought the fan and given it to Darny. Darny barely remembered the woman herself, except for an impression of strength, and that everyone seemed to hate her. The last object was a databead. I recognized it at once, but Darny thought it was a pearl. She didn't know where she had gotten it, only that she'd always had it. When I explained what it was she was fascinated and wanted to know if I had a means to play it. "There's probably a way in Charic," I said. "You might be disappointed. It might be music or a book, but it could as easily be records from some computer manifest."

She rolled everything up, except the bead. "I wanted to show you these things because I wanted you to know me. The things most important to a person tell a lot." At that moment I knew I would not know her for long. The passport, the emerald, the dragon fan, the runaway aunt—Darny was heading farther than *Leander* could take her. Just like Hil.

I reached for her and we shared each other hungrily, urgently. I think she felt it, too, and it saddened her a little. But I'm not sure she understood, as I thought I did, that I would see her again one day. Three days later we came to Charic.

**C**haric is the heart of the Manassa traffic. The city had been built south of the Confluences, but had grown north so that Charic covered most of the wedge of land formed by the meeting of the Manassa and Trilon Rivers. From the docks you could look across the broad expanse of water to where the Cario River came in from the west. New docks and warehouses were being constructed over there to meet the growing needs of the river traffic and new settlers and the expanding colony. Multiple locks stack barges five and six high for service. Beyond the bustle of the docks high towers shot up. Beyond them lay the spaceport.

The broker we did business with was an old firm called Bendersel-Rikmic, a franchise branch of Transtellar Incorporated. Once in awhile we dealt with a representative from the conglomerate, but usually we met the local rep, a pleasant man named Schimsol. He greeted us warmly and offered advice on how to deal with the people at Downer's Landing. He didn't feel they had a just claim, but there was still the possibility of fines and certainly court time and the need for lawyers. I was already tired of the dispute. It was weeks in the past, and I shrugged it off. Rel grew very impatient with me, but I was bargemaster. I insisted Schimsol come look at our cargo. He was very impressed. He had been prepared to offer a loan to cover any debts we might have accrued, but he felt that would be unnecessary, judging from the size and marketability of our haul. He smiled and said he would take care of it all. I wanted to celebrate, but Darny wanted to go to the spaceport.

"Didn't I say?" Rel muttered. I glared at her and she said no more.

"There are plenty of omnirecs and taverns around the spaceport," I said. Rel gave me a significant look but remained silent. An enclosed walkway arched above the wall of Charic Spaceport. You

can look out across the polycrrete field dotted with gantries and launch platforms, many occupied by shuttles.

Against the north wall, warehouses huddle like cold beasts seeking warmth, and just within the wall the administration buildings glisten in austere prospect. I remembered this place with a mixture of fear and enchantment. Here our brother had left us, probably forever, to search for something I feel certain cannot be found. Darny pressed against the transparency and stared. Her expression—lips parted, eyes wide, hands touching the window as if she would reach out and caress all she saw—hurt more than I expected. I looked away and found Rel regarding me stonily. Lor watched Darny and I could see the tears in her eyes.

After a while she turned away and walked on. I touched Darny's shoulder. "Do you have to?" She nodded. I obliterated my consciousness that night, exceeding my normal intake and broadening my range of experimentation.

**I**n the morning I stared at the ceiling of the sleepover until the surface seemed to shift and shimmer. Lor was folded up in an armchair across the room and Darny lay curled up beside me. "Where's Rel?" I asked, my voice a raspy croak.

Lor moved, frowned, shrugged. "Don't know. She left early." Darny stretched and rolled over. Watching her, an ache worked its way throughout my body. Rel did not show up before we were ready to leave, so Lor and I escorted Darny to the port offices. After several inquiries, we were directed to a resource pool. Darny was taken into a booth for testing, and we waited in a quiet lounge with holo images on the walls of different worlds, ships, stars. Neither of us had anything to say. Lor sat stiffly in a chair, staring at nothing, while I paced and prowled, looking for something into which to pour my anxiety.

There was always the possibility that Darny would fail the tests, they could find her unacceptable. But when she emerged in the company of two blue-suited techs, I knew that wasn't the case. She looked excited and gave us a tight, hope-filled smile, and all I could think of was that she might not be allowed to say goodbye. My fear turned to anger. The Manassa wasn't sufficient for her, like my brother; Nine Rivers had no hold on their imaginations. I tried to think of the river in these terms, dull and lifeless and so ordinary that empty space seemed vital and seductive, but I could not. Perhaps it is only possible for some, and the rest of us must content ourselves only with what we *can* perceive, always shaking our heads in wonder—or horror—at those who see something else.

*AT THAT MOMENT I knew I would not know her for long. Darny was heading farther than Leander could take her. Just like Hil.*

Darny came out into the lounge an hour later. "I want you to have these," she said and pressed the databead into my hand and the fan into Lor's. "I won't need them."

Lor nodded solemnly. "Will you be back?"

Darny hesitated. "I'd like to say yes, but I don't know. Probably not me—not Darny Caples. Tomorrow I'll be fitted with an interface and after that I can link with the dataspheres and synthetic intelligences. I won't be the same after that."

I pulled her into an embrace and held her, hard, till I knew it hurt, but I couldn't let go. Darny started pushing at me, saying, "please, please," very quietly, until Lor put her hands on my shoulders and drew me away. "Thank you," Darny said. We were all crying by then and I still could think of nothing to say. I nodded mutely and watched her go back into the places where she'd be remade.

"Rel will be upset she missed it," Lor said.

"No, she won't. She'd have been here if she gave a damn," I



muttered. Lor opened the fan; the dragon caught the light, glistened wetly.

"It's pretty." She glanced at my hand. "Are you going to access it?"

I looked at the databead for a long time, then shook my head. "I don't want to know any more about Darny Caples than I already do."

We went from tavern to omnirec to pub all night. I reached for new levels of dissipation, seeking transubstantiation in the varieties of volatile substances served up in the belly of Charic. I wanted to erase myself and replace myself with a being who did not ache from loss, someone who was not driven to the extremes of negation that I hoped were the vehicle of my reconstruction. I was disappointed in the morning when I remembered only that I had gotten magnificently intoxicated.

When we returned to the docks *Leander* was gone. "Schimsol!" I found our agent in his offices. He looked up with wide eyes when I burst in. "Where's my barge?"

"Co Ottenner?" He blinked, baffled.

"Where's my barge!" I reached for him across his desk and he shoved himself back, barely out of reach. I put a foot on the edge of his desk, ready to spring at him. "My barge! *Leander*!"

"Your sister took it out!" Schimsol sputtered.

"Lor's with me!" I yelled.

"Your other sister, Rel. Last night." He looked frightened. "Didn't you know?"

I stared at him a long time. He moved laterally to a terminal and tapped it for data, which scrolled up on a screen next to me. He pointed to it and I read. Rel had contracted for three stops along the river for Bendersel-Rikmic. She had hired hands from the general dock pool. The terms were fair and profitable, but she would be gone a month. There was an option for six more runs, depending on how well these went.

"She left word at your bank," Schimsol said.

"She took it," Lor said. "She finally took *Leander*. She stranded us."

I nodded and took my foot off Schimsol's desk. "I want a copy of this," I said, pointing at the screen.

We went to our banker. Rel had left a note explaining that she was assuming control of *Leander* for a time, just to see if more could be done with her than had been. There was money, the contract guaranteed us an income, we were to enjoy a prolonged vacation in Charic. As a faction of the corporation that was our family, Rel had the right to do exactly what she had done, and the contract was firm. The only thing she had violated was Mother's wishes. Lor and I went back to the sleepover.

"So what do we do?" Lor asked.

"Do I have to decide today?" I curled up on the mat and tried to focus on my numbness. I didn't want to get like this, but losing Darny and *Leander* in one day was more of an assault on my resilience than I could manage.

"Soon," Lor said, squeezing my arm. "Sleep now."

The sleepover was inadequate for a long stay, so we went out to find better accommodations. Lor found a place near the newer docks on the north side. From the small balcony we could watch the coming and going of the river traffic, a pastime that quickly soured for me. I couldn't keep *Leander* out of my thoughts and the sight of so many barges and boats, none mine, prodded the ache. I stayed inside most of the time while Lor went out. Inside the apartment I nursed numbness. I found a place where reality is mere memory, an ignorable nothing, and excuses are abundant for never acknowledging the present or future. Need becomes a reason for more buffer, more distance between you and everything that might make you feel. I lost touch with time. I never asked Lor what she found outside her numbness to draw her again and again to embrace living. It might have been an empty gesture and that would have angered me. It might have been something worthwhile and that would have saddened me. But she

left earlier each day and came back later. I always knew when she returned, even when I slept.

"Are you ever going to *do* anything again?" she asked. I shrugged. Didn't she see I *was* doing something? I was very aggressively *not* hurting. That was something. If she couldn't see that...in any case I wasn't going to try to explain.

*TOMORROW I'LL BE fitted with an interface and after that I can link with the dataspheres and synthetic intelligences. I won't be the same.*

One night she staggered in early. I listened intently as she stumbled to the bathroom. Water ran for a long time and I got out of bed. Light framed her where she leaned over the sink, hair hanging down. I stepped up behind her. I saw myself frowning in the mirror and wondered if that look I wore was concern or something else I'd discovered since—

She glanced up into the mirror and I glimpsed her face before she twisted aside to hide. Puffy, bruised, blood caking at the corner of her mouth. I grabbed her and tried to pull her around. It was important for me to *see*, but she writhed and slipped from my grasp. She fell against the shower stall, caught herself on the far wall. I squeezed in with her and reached for her face. Lor shook her head vehemently, pushed out of the stall, and clipped the sink with her hip. She dropped to the floor then. A moment later she shoved her hair back and glared up at me.

"Who?" I asked.

"It's not important," she lisped.

I took a fresh washcloth and soaked it with water, then knelt and started cleaning her face. After a time she took the cloth from me and got to her feet. "My fight," she said and went to bed.

I sat near the door the rest of the night, fearing—perhaps hoping—her assailant had followed her. Every sound seemed greater, more important than ever before, and my neck began to ache from my unnatural readiness. I went to bed well after dawn, but I didn't sleep. I listened for Lor's movement. Just before midday she ran to the bathroom and I heard her retching. When I heard the shower I got up and made breakfast. Lor came into the small kitchen and watched me sullenly.

"Whatever you're cooking," she said huskily, "I won't eat it. I hate wasting food. And I won't tell you who did this. I had it coming anyway. I picked the fight."

"What does the winner look like?" I asked.

"Me." I set a plate before her and she visibly paled, but took the fork and managed to eat a few bites. "Gam," she said. "We have to leave Charic."

I sat down. "You killed someone?"

"No. Not yet anyway. If we stay I might. I will." She sipped coffee, winced. "But we're dying regardless." The air around my head seemed to warm. I looked away, busied myself with my own breakfast, which I'd had no intention of making or eating. "Gam—"

"I don't know what you mean," I heard myself say.

"Don't *know*—!" She threw her fork at me and it bounced off my shoulder. "You sit in here all day and night! I keep thinking one of these days I'll come back and you won't be here. I'd be happy in a way, because you'd've gone to *do* something! But I'd be all alone, then, and it's bad enough now!"

"No," I said.

"Don't tell me no! You're not Rel and you're not Mother!"

I repeated, "No."

"You're not! And we're not fit to live in port like fat merchant bankers! We've got to leave!" Lor yelled. I shook my head. The

*Continued on page 68*



Even after 20,000 years  
and a nuclear inferno, planet Earth  
will still contain its share of...

# SURVIVORS

BY STEVEN POPKES

*Illustration by Fred DeVita*

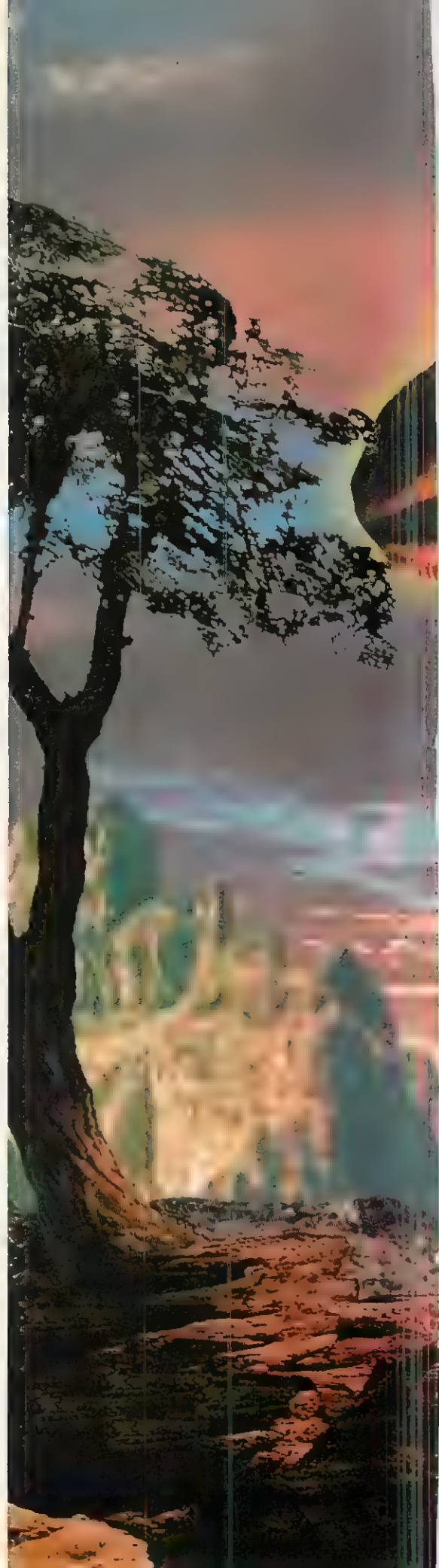
**I**RKUTSK LET HIS HORSE SIBERIAD CARRY him slowly east as he rummaged for another crab apple in his saddlebag. There was only one left. He considered it in his hand for a moment, tilting his hat back, then replaced the fruit. It would be a treat with dinner. Instead of eating, he let his gaze follow the land.

The earth was flat here—deceptively so. Spring rains had gouged out narrow, dry gullies invisible against the flat scrub grass. The soil was poor—a bilious yellow as if the earth had been skinned and the corpse left behind. Tall, dry grass waved stiffly in the light wind and the spring flowers had a sharp, irritating smell. Irkutsk fit in with this land. He was thin—muscle and gristle stretched across bone—and his skin had the same dry texture as the soil and looked hard enough to turn a knife. This hardness was an illusion; a long scar started low on his neck and disappeared into his shirt. From the shape and length of it, the eye was led down that path over heart, lungs and belly.

He slipped from the horse and crouched next to the gully, felt of its soil. It had been dry for some time. The grasses growing in it and on its banks, though, were not as withered as he thought they should have been. Clumps of the grass looked as if they had been bitten short. Slowly, leading Siberiad, he walked along the crumbling gray dirt.

Irkutsk froze. Seemingly separate from the rest of him, his hand and arm pulled his crosspiece from the saddle: two sticks sharpened on both ends, tied together in the form of a cross. He held it loosely, resting slightly against the horse. He stood this way for several minutes, his gaze unfocused, as if he'd suddenly seen something to make him contemplative.

His body, arm and hand snapped as though whipped and he followed the crosspiece into the gully. A woodchuck screamed, pinned to the earth. Irkutsk broke the animal's neck, stood up and grinned. He looked up at Siberiad. The horse merely stared at him, then tried to eat some of the tough grass.









The woodchuck skinned and dressed and tied to the saddle, Irkutsk remounted and let the horse follow the gully. The sun rose and he pulled his hat down over his eyes and fell asleep.

**"STOP!"**  
Irkutsk awoke with his knife in hand. Before him was an apparition: a man dressed in rags. Rotten skin fell from his face and hands in long, decomposing strips. The voice was a rasping choke. The apparition faded in and out of focus with sparkles of light. He seemed to materialize and dematerialize in waves.

"Come no farther," said the apparition.

Irkutsk reined the horse to a stop and resheathed his knife—it was useless against such a thing. Some ghosts could hurt you and some couldn't. A prudent man treated them all the same. He looked at the sun. He'd been asleep a little less than an hour—Siberiad had not walked far enough for Irkutsk to be lost.

"Good afternoon," he said to the apparition.

"Come no farther," it droned.

He waited for the apparition to say more, but it seemed content to stand and look mysterious. It was now late in the afternoon and night would be coming soon. After waiting several more minutes, Irkutsk grew impatient. He slid off the horse and began to gather some firewood. That could take some time in this land.

The apparition followed him. "Come no farther."

Irkutsk ignored him as he picked up some sticks.

It moved in front of him, startling him, and he dropped the wood.

"Damn," he muttered. He faced it. "Why shouldn't I come any farther?"

"Come no farther."

"I heard that part."

The apparition stopped for a moment, frozen before him. He seemed to come further into focus. "This ground is poisoned."

"Poisoned?" Irkutsk retrieved the firewood and returned to the gully.

It walked alongside him. "Poisoned. You are in great danger if you proceed."

"Proceed where?"

"There." The apparition pointed west.

"I left my tribe and my family to come this way. To go west." He decided where he would place his camp and lay down the firewood.

"Come no farther."

"Right." Irkutsk made a small fire pit and lined it with the sticks. "What poisoned the ground?"

There was no answer. The apparition was gone.

For a long moment, Irkutsk watched the land around him. Nothing moved. The air was hot and still; the grass and earth seemed in a kind of pause. There was no sound.

After a time, a breeze picked up and he could smell the cool of the coming evening. The turn of the world seemed to catch and he heard, a long way off, the bark of a coyote.

He started the fire and began to cook the woodchuck.

**T**HE APPARITION RETURNED AFTER dusk.

"You're still here," it said when it appeared.

Irkutsk picked his teeth with a grass stem. The woodchuck had been a bit gamey. "I've proceeded no farther."

"That's true."

"You look stronger."

It nodded. "It takes a lot more power to reach this far in the daylight."

Irkutsk nodded. He understood the ways of power. His own spirit bag held some bits of magic corn, the talon of an owl. The bag had saved his life when they'd had to fight bandits, allowing him to kill their leader and only leaving him a scar to remind him of the bag's power. He'd given the ear of the bandit to it. Now the bag and the ear, lay next to his heart. Of course, he would not mention any of this to an apparition whose nature he did not understand.

"The batteries have to be recharged," it added.

"Batteries?"

"I'm mostly solar powered, but I need the batteries to keep running."

"Ah." Irkutsk had heard that apparitions spoke in their own language. Now, he knew this to be true.

The apparition seemed to sit across from him. Irkutsk knew this to be illusion, since part of it disappeared into a rock. Now that he could see it by night, he saw that it appeared to have its own glow. The light of the fire did not make it brighten or dim. It occurred to him that the apparition must be composed of captured sunlight, much like fireflies and stars.

"Ah," he said when he understood this. "Solar powered."

"Yes," it said. "I'm glad you understand. It's not always easy for me to make myself understood."

Irkutsk shrugged. Of course, being a chief, he understood more than most people of the ways of power. "It has not helped you, I see." Irkutsk held his hand out towards the other. "You seem to be ill."

The apparition pointed to its face. "You mean this? It's just to show the effect of the poison."

"You don't normally look like this?"

"Well, yes, I do. It's part of the way I'm built. But it doesn't mean I'm sick, you see."

"Ah." Irkutsk nodded. There was no reason an apparition had to be sick when it looked sick. His wife, Bose, had been troubled for most of her life by a vision of her mother as the old woman had been when she died. That had been over 20 years ago and the vision was still going strong. Clearly, death, much less disease, had been no impediment to the old woman. Her ghost had been Irkutsk's only misgiving about marrying Bose. But their daughter, Cheyenne, had never seen the ghost. Irkutsk considered asking the apparition's advice about it. The old woman had been troubling Bose long enough. Perhaps, the apparition knew some way of propitiating her. He decided against it, thinking that since he knew little of the etiquette in such matters, he might give offense.

"Of course, if you looked like I do, you would be sick."

"Of course. But then, I don't."

"You would, if you continue west."

"So you say."

"It's true."

Irkutsk remembered the crab apple. He pulled it out and ate it carefully, relishing the bitter sweet taste.

"Don't eat anything you find around here! It will make you deadly sick. Poison! Come no farther!"

Irkutsk stopped and looked at it, then at the crabapple, then back at the apparition. "I've had this for several days."

"Oh. It's all right, then."

"These don't even grow around here."

"Sorry. I don't get out much. Please, continue eating. Sorry to have disturbed you."

Irkutsk finished his apple, irritated. "I ate the woodchuck. I killed it when you appeared. Won't it make me sick?"

"That's different, you see. It's an animal."

"I don't understand."

"It's an animal. This ground has been poisoned a long time. If the woodchuck had been poisoned, it would have looked sick. You see?"





"And it didn't."

"Exactly. Therefore, it wasn't poisoned and bad for you to eat. Plants are different. They might live through what could kill you."

Irkutsk tossed the core of the apple away. It made a rude sort of sense. "Do you have a name?"

"A name?" The apparition shrugged. "Well, that's a hard question to answer. The person I was made from had a name—but that was a long time ago. He's dead. I'm not sure I really ought to use it now."

"My name's Irkutsk. That's Siberiad, my horse." He pointed across the fire. "Among my people it's polite to return a name with a name. And I've given you two."

The apparition seemed to freeze a moment as it had before this afternoon. Irkutsk concluded it might be the equivalent of being lost in thought.

"I was called George when I was alive," the apparition said suddenly. "I suppose he—I—wouldn't have any use for it now."

"Hm." Irkutsk shook his head. "An odd name."

"I was named after a famous saint," George said sharply. "Irkutsk doesn't seem any less strange."

"My name is that of the town my great-grandfather put to the torch." Irkutsk laughed suddenly. "At least, so goes the song. I always thought the old man too drunk to light a torch much less a town. My horse is named for that song. I'm sorry if I gave offense. I've never heard of anybody being named that way."

"It's been a long time. Customs change," said George, seemingly mollified. "You said your family was near here?"

Irkutsk nodded. "We used to live across the river, south of here. The Dyansans didn't like us when they moved up there. But who cared about that? We were here first. Sheepfuckers, all of them. Finally, we had a war. We were doing well—we'd have beaten them—but the earthquake hit. Did you feel that this far north?"

"I felt it."

"The Dyansans rallied before we did, killed a lot of us and drove us across the river. Killed my brother. Would have killed me but they didn't get the chance." Irkutsk poked a stick into the fire and revived it. "We've been looking for a good place to live all summer."

"Who are the Dyansans?"

"Sheepfuckers."

"Besides that."

"I think they're related to one of the families down south. One of the cities—Paris, probably—drove them north and then they drove us up here."

"I see."

Irkutsk poked the fire again and sparks flew up into the night. He watched them carefully but they went out in the air. He had no desire to be caught in a prairie fire. "So, how did you come here? Being dead, and all."

"I'm not dead. I was copied."

"Whatever the process is."

George froze and Irkutsk waited as it thought.

"I'm supposed to guard this place," said George.

"It's poison."

"It wasn't always poison. You see—a long time ago something

**BEFORE HIM  
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THE VOICE WAS  
A RASPING  
CHOKE.**

was buried here." George gestured out into the darkness with a skeletal hand. "A very bad poison. So bad that if you were even to stand near it for a little while, you would soon look like me. And it would stay poisonous for a long time."

"I've heard of such poisons," Irkutsk said quietly. "In songs. The Siberiad is such a song. But they have all died out. It's been a long time."

"True. But this one is still strong."

"Hm. If I can't go across this poisoned land, then can you guide me around it?"

George froze again.

Curious, thought Irkutsk. I would have thought that would have required no thought at all.

"Of course," said George. "We can go north."

Irkutsk considered. "How far north?"

"It's a couple of days walk around the—"

"How far if we go south instead? The river is only half a day's walk away. And I know that land well."

"It's better, I think."

"I think not," said Irkutsk and spit in the fire. "I have left a wife and child behind me—and my daughter is not yet three. If it's shorter to the south, then I'll go south."

George froze again, then looked at him. "Perhaps you're right."

Irkutsk didn't speak then lay out a blanket on the ground. "I'll sleep now. In the morning you can guide me south."

George disappeared.

Curious, he thought in the darkness around the fire. Very curious.

**A**T DAWN, GEORGE APPEARED next to him. "Go south-east," he said. "When you stray too far toward the east, I'll come to you and tell you—"

"Come no farther." I know the speech." Irkutsk checked his water bags. Enough for a day or so; no more. He'd have to set

out dew traps tonight.

He let Siberiad carry him in the prescribed direction all morning, turning more directly south whenever George appeared and pronounced a promised doom. George, he reasoned, must have a geas on him that is linked to the sun's power. When the sun was up, the geas was stronger. Perhaps, he answered himself. But that is flimsy reasoning for how he behaves.

Just after midday, the horse came to the top of a small rill. The rill had masked from view an enormous crater, so great he could not determine how big it truly was. Parts had fallen in over time—one whole section had come loose, exposing several cave openings and in the center of the crater was a small lake. Irkutsk saw ducks on the surface of the water. He guessed the earth fall had happened recently from the color of the dirt in the fallen earth and around the cave openings. But from the weathered look of the cliffs, the crater had been here a long time.

The crater forced his progress south that much farther, so he turned Siberiad northeast instead of southeast.

"Come no farther!" said daylight George immediately before him.

"I've got to," said Irkutsk calmly. "The path south is too long to go around."

George froze, then seemed to change. "Irkutsk. You can't turn north here. The source of the poison is nearby. You'll have to go



around. Now, do you see why I didn't want you to come south?"

"If that's the case, why didn't you tell me before?" Irkutsk stared into the crater, looking at its extent and the caves in its side. "I'll camp here."

"There's plenty of daylight left—"

"That's good. I'll get in some hunting."

George disappeared. Irkutsk sat on the ridge overlooking the crater for a long time before he began to hunt.

**G**EORGE CAME PROMPTLY AT SUNDOWN. "I CAN'T EXPLAIN these things to you easily."  
"That crater's old." Irkutsk continued skinning and cleaning the collection of ground squirrels he'd caught. He'd roast them, he'd decided, until they were crisp. Two or three sweet bites each, bones and all. "They're rare—"

"They were only used a few times. Little wars—"

Irkutsk ignored him and continued. "—but I've heard of them before—I know the stories. Rivers of fire. Monsters. But that was a long time ago—I even know a village that lives in one and nobody is ill."

"It's not the crater that's poisonous," insisted George. "It's the poison—look, do you know what radioactive waste is?"

"No."

"You've never heard any songs about nuclear reactors?"

"Never."

"Damn."

Irkutsk impaled the ground squirrels on three sticks and lay them over the fire. The smell of them cooking was delectable.

"Chipmunk shish kebab," observed George.

"What's a chipmunk?"

"Nevermind."

"Look," began Irkutsk. "You've warned me well enough. You've done your duty—surely that's enough. I'll go north and take my chances."

"No! You can't do that. You'll die."

Irkutsk shrugged. "Maybe so, but that's not your problem. As I said, you've done your duty."

George froze for a long moment. "All right," he said finally. "But go around the crater—don't go in it! The poison is very strong in the crater."

"But the one I saw before—"

"This crater is different," George said angrily. "It's not like any other crater you've ever heard of."

"Very well." Irkutsk held up his hands in what he hoped was a conciliatory gesture. "This crater is poison."

"Don't go in it."

Irkutsk pulled the ground squirrels out of the fire and began to eat them. George watched him.

"Do you want some?" offered Irkutsk.

George watched him a long minute. "I can't eat anything. There are a lot of pleasures I haven't been able to enjoy for a long time."

"Do you mind if I eat? I'll wait until you leave if you like."

"Go ahead." George smiled sadly at him—or at least appeared to smile. It was hard to tell with a face that was mostly skull. "I'll try to enjoy from a distance."

Irkutsk nodded and began to eat. "How long has it been?"

"For what?"

"Since you've been able to eat?"

George chuckled wearily. "I haven't eaten, drank, smoked or had a woman in nearly 20,000 years."

Irkutsk grunted, mouth full of squirrel. "A long time," he said when he'd swallowed.

"Long indeed."

"The Dyansans believe that if you are not a Dyansan, you go to hell forever when you die," said Irkutsk conversationally. "That sounds a lot like hell. And 20,000 years sounds a lot like forever."

"It's better than the alternative. And it is *my* life, isn't it?"

"I suppose," said Irkutsk, finishing the last of the squirrel and leaning back against a tree.

"You don't believe it was that long?"

"I didn't say that." Irkutsk made his voice deliberately neutral.

"That's why they put me here—people can change a great deal in that time."

"I don't doubt it."

"It's true. I remember when that crater glowed at night. It could kill you from miles away!"

Irkutsk didn't answer.

George spread out his hands. "It's true!"

"The crater does not glow now, George."

"That's because it was a long time ago!"

"I've heard the songs." Irkutsk spread out his blanket, positioned his saddlebags for a pillow. "And I know other craters no longer glow."

"You still don't believe me?"

"I believe you. It's interesting that no poison has survived anywhere else but here, isn't it?" Irkutsk lay down.

"Everywhere else people have stolen it," said George quietly. "Stolen it and died and it's been moved around until it lost whatever poison it had. It's been dispersed—that's why nothing else is left. It won't happen here, damn it. Is that what you were wondering? Is that why you won't go south?"

"No."

George raised his hands above his head in exasperation. "Then what is making you so stubborn?"

"I'm wondering what it is you're hiding."

"Nothing! It's just dangerous. I don't want you killed!"

"Ah, I see." Irkutsk moved his saddlebags to a more comfortable position. "But then, it is *my* life, isn't it?"

George made a sound of disgust and disappeared.

Irkutsk lay watching the stars and listening to the faint, lonely wind blowing over the lip of the crater.

**G**EORGE DID NOT APPEAR AS IRKUTSK WALKED NORTH-east along the crater rim. The edge of the crater was heavily eroded, so Irkutsk stayed far back and continued on the ridge. From here, he could see that the ridge circled the crater, making it appear like a ring surrounding the splash of a great rock falling into a greater pond.

With even this little rise, Irkutsk could see the plain in all directions. Small trees and bushes were plentiful but sparse in distribution. They gave the land a pastel green hue. He could see short prairie grass below that, a red brown river under pale green smoke.

When he had crossed the lower rim surrounding the crater, he saw that the fall of earth he'd seen the day before was only a small part of the damage that must have been done by the earthquake. He leaned over the edge of a deep ravine.

The story was written in the way the earth lay soft beneath Siberiad, in the texture and color of the soil, in the dry stream bed in the bottom. This had been the path the water had taken into the crater. Over the years, the spring rains had cut the ravine more deeply until it had created an overhang. The earthquake had knocked the overhang down and the earth above, supported by it, had cascaded into the crater. The stream now would make a long waterfall when the next rains came.

He could see the caves were not far from the edge of the new waterfall. Irkutsk guided Siberiad to where the ravine became shallow and walked over the edge.

George appeared, twice as big as before, and cried out in a deep voice: "Come no farther!"

Siberiad shied and Irkutsk fell back. Siberiad fell heavily on his side and Irkutsk scrambled over to him. The horse didn't breathe for a moment, eyes white with fear. Then, the horse cried out and rolled to his feet, galloped over the soft dirt and out of the stream bed.

Irkutsk lay back weakly. At least, Siberiad didn't seem to be hurt. When the horse calmed down, he could call it back.

George was still standing over him. Irkutsk threw a rock at him and it passed through George, making a quick, sharp hiss. The apparition shimmered and re-formed.



"Sorry, Irkutsk!" George said and shrank down to man size. "You can't go down this ravine! You just can't. Here's where the poison is the strongest."

Irkutsk sat up and spat out dirt. "In the caves, you mean. That's where you don't want me to go."

"This whole area is dangerous, not just the caves," George pleaded. "The longer you're here, the more sick you're going to be."

"Right." He stood up and dusted himself off. "I think I'll see these caves of yours."

"They'll kill you!"

"Maybe." Irkutsk found his hat and cleaned the dirt off. "Maybe." He started walking down the ravine.

George appeared before him, huge and with a voice of thunder. "I can't let you go down there."

"If you could have stopped me, you wouldn't have tried to persuade me." Irkutsk pulled his hat low. "If you can, then now's the time."

George didn't answer, he just bellowed and charged him. Irkutsk closed his eyes and waited but he felt nothing. Through his eyelids he felt a light like that of mild sunlight, but nothing more. He kept his eyes nearly closed in the light and though the sparkles made him dizzy, he was able to carefully half-walk, half-climb down the ravine and along the cliff until he stood at the lip of the caves.

George disappeared.

**I**RKUTSK STOOD UP AND PULLED HIMSELF over the edge of the cave. A huge and angry George ran straight for him, suddenly and without warning, and Irkutsk almost jumped back over the cliff edge before he remembered and closed his eyes.

Nothing happened. Irkutsk looked behind him. The cliff was high over the crater floor.

The cave was broken and rough on the outside, but inside it was smooth, flat rock. Now that he was inside the cave, he could see piled high upon each other, bars of yellow metal.

"This is gold," he said slowly. "They will give almost anything for this down south in the cities."

George appeared beside him. "It is not gold. It is a poison that only has the appearance of gold. You are nearly dead just standing here. Go, please."

"Come on, George. You can't be too concerned about me getting sick if you tried to scare me into jumping!" Regardless of whether the apparition cared for his welfare or not, its light was enough to see that the caves were hollowed out and man-made, and extended far under the prairie.

"It is poison."

"All the poison is dead. It died long before I was born. What makes this place so different?"

George froze for a long moment. "I kept it radioactive."

"That's one of those words again."

"I did," said George earnestly. "When these ingots were placed here, they were placed so that they would heat each other up and shorten the time they were dangerous. I spread them out, except for here and there where I put a few together. I hoarded them."

Irkutsk turned to look at George. He could see the cave entrance through him. In spite of that, George's face looked, through all its

**ALL THE WARS,  
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skeletal horror, as if he were desperately telling the truth.

"Hoarded them for what?"

"Solar power isn't enough to keep somebody like me going. The designers used the power from the waste as well. This is my life here. This is what keeps me going. I'm only supposed to be alive as long as it's still dangerous. It's not much of a life, but it's *mine*."

"Ah." Much came clear to Irkutsk. "It's your power. I can understand that." He looked at the gold and considered it. One ingot would buy him some of the city weapons—spears and maybe guns. Certainly, it would buy him men enough to take back their land from the Dyansans. He picked one up.

"It will kill you. I'm telling the absolute truth!" howled George.

Irkutsk hefted the bar and placed it on his shoulder. "I'm only taking one."

"Damn you! You are going to die. If I still had my weapons—"

"What happened to them?"

"What weapon do you know that will operate after 20,000 years? All the wars, a few plagues here, a couple of nukes tossed around, all-out war using nerve gas—I've seen all of that. Things build up and fall again. No civilization ever lasted for more than 1,000 years or so. It's ruins everywhere—I know. I've been talking to all of you whenever you come by. Nothing lasts forever and it's no different here. Everything is broken," said George miserably. "I'm lucky to be alive—if you could call it life." George watched him as he left the cave.

The bar was heavy. Still, Irkutsk was able to tie it to his back and make his way carefully to the ravine and walk out onto the prairie.

He found Siberiad without much trouble. Though the horse was not enthused about the experience, it was still tractable enough to let him mount without protesting.

George appeared next to him.

"Irkutsk," he said slowly and carefully. "Listen—"

"Don't worry," said Irkutsk as he made sure the gold wouldn't chafe Siberiad. "I only need one. I'll keep your secret. No one's going to find this place."

"I know," George said sadly. "But, it is still poison. It will still kill you and anyone who stays near it."

"Don't be greedy, George. You can spare one." He switched Siberiad toward the west, and in a few moments he had left George behind. The apparition did not follow.

**S**OMETIME LATER THAT AFTERNOON, HE HUNTED AND caught a rabbit. He skinned it, sitting in the saddle, in a hurry now to get home. The gold bar was pretty in the sun. The metal felt softer than iron. He'd seen jewelry made from it in Paris, when he'd visited that city long ago. He resolved to make a necklace for Bose on the way home. There was plenty of metal. Maybe, a bracelet for Cheyenne, as well. Yes, he thought. There was plenty.

On his way home, Irkutsk considered what the jewelry should look like, how it would shine in the sun, and how beautiful it would look adorning his wife and daughter. □



Video arcade ace Joe Rutherford may be an expert  
at zapping spacewhales and voidsharks,  
but he'll soon discover that time travel can be murder.

# TAKEN FOR A RIDE

BY BRIAN STABLEFORD

*Illustration by Michael Whelan*

**A**S SOON AS HE HAD FINISHED his evening meal, Joe rode the Bakerloo line from Lambeth up to Piccadilly Circus, arriving just in time to take up the 15-minute slot he'd booked on the new so-called Virtual Reality machine at the Trocadero. It was a gyroscopically-mounted sensurround that could do full rotations in all three dimensions, giving the rider the impression of a theme park roller coaster even though it was anchored to the spot. The rider was supposed to be strapped in the pilot's seat in an interstellar spaceship, but the game involved zapping spacewhales, voidsharks and cloudcloaks instead of enemy ships firing off implausibly noisy lasers.

Joe enjoyed the session. He had been in far too many flight-simulators to be fooled by the game's special effects, and the instructive voice piped into his earphones was unnecessarily strident, but the visuals were good and there was a

certain intellectual challenge in figuring out the various kinds of natural defenses the wildlife had. He didn't bother worrying about the plausibility or otherwise of nuclear-powered wildlife carrying on the red-clawed struggle for existence in intergalactic dust clouds—some things you just had to take as given.

He scored just under 33,000. The machine assured him that this was way above average, but Joe the Arcade Ace couldn't be satisfied with that, given that the machine had only been in place a week and the average must have been calculated almost entirely from the scores of debutants. He was sure he could double up next time, now that he'd figured out the elements of the winning strategy.

The game might have been more exciting if he'd been slightly high, but it was Thursday and he was at rock bottom. He always came down for the working week so as not to take the risk of fouling up in the lab. His work there was time-







# The crazy thing was that when he was coming out of the alley, it seemed more like an

serving routine with no real bite, but he wanted his doctorate badly and he was just as desperate to get a good score on that as he was to master every latest PC challenge. You couldn't get anywhere these days in industrial chemistry or pharmaceuticals unless you had a doctorate with distinction—a common-or-garden BSc was just so much toilet paper. But one of the best things about bumping along at ground zero from Monday nine to Friday five was looking forward to a real orbital boost Friday night, and now was the time to get fixed up. Back in the Underground he hopped on Old Indigo and rode up to King's Cross to make his connection.

Joe enjoyed his trips to King's Cross, all the more so since the police had started their 14th crusade to clean up the area. He liked the surreal atmosphere the place had, and the heightened self-consciousness that came from knowing that this square mile had a greater density of hidden spy-cameras than any other in the land, not excepting the Forbidden City itself. The tension began to build while he was still on the tube-train, and when the escalator carried him up into the station, it gradually grew into a buzz which was as exhilarating, in its way, as a hit—not as intense or as long-lasting as a fruitcake or couple of Es, but nice in its own way.

*Out of the Underground, into the Underworld*, he thought, as he dodged around the well-heeled queue for the Virgin Executive Shuttle to Edinburgh and made his way out of the brilliantly-lit concourse into the neon-stained night. It gave him a big lift to think that he knew his way around this little circle of the Underworld, that he had a reliable supplier who always had authentic MDMA, none of your badly-cooked MDA or LSD-methy cocktails. He liked walking the *étal*, having the girls call out to him, even though he was never tempted—why pay for a hurried screw in a rubber suit when you could buy the *real thing* just a little way down the line? Joe took pride in being a discerning consumer who spent his fun money wisely.

IT WAS RAINING WHEN HE GOT OUT OF THE STATION, BUT THAT didn't dampen his spirits. The rain seemed somehow *apt*, like the rain that was always falling in certain kinds of *film noir* scenes. He would have had the hood of his anorak up anyway, because of the cameras. The deal itself would be done in the dark, in some briefly-shielded corner where everyone was cozily safe from nightsights, but he always liked to be careful about being spotted going in and out. He was already on file with the drug squad, so it wouldn't make any real difference if they got one more blurred snap for his album, but he didn't want to attract *too much* attention—after all, he had his future career to think about. He wasn't a long-term loser like the fleshwads on the *étal* or the petty pushers; he had his first class honors on the wall and his doctorate in the bag. In the Underworld he was strictly a tourist and an untouchable. He'd never been tempted to overbuy so that he could hawk it around the college, any more than he'd been tempted to start a home-brew project in the labs; that sort of involvement was far too risky.

The crazy thing was that when the two guys grabbed him as he was coming out of the alley, it seemed more like an extra twist to the excitement than a total disaster. It was a bummer, but there was an edge to it, like reaching a level he'd never reached before in a particularly difficult game. He didn't relish the prospect of losing the Es he'd just bought, or taking another caution from the boys in blue, but he wasn't scared and he didn't panic.

"Hey!" he said, to the guy on his right, who seemed positively mountainous in the half-light. "Gently! Didn't you forget to show me a warrant card?"

Neither of them replied, but that didn't bother Joe. He already knew that he had the right to remain silent, etc.—and all the crap that went with it. Nor did it bother him that the guys who'd grabbed him weren't in uniform—the DS always looked far worse than the pushers and the pimps. The only real shock he got was when the big man's face was briefly illuminated and he saw how empty it was: devoid of expression, of personality, of everything.

*Whatever he's on, Joe thought, must be one hell of a dazer.*

Then he saw the vehicle they were taking him to. It was parked on the road, illegally, but no one was complaining. It was a Rolls Royce Silver Shadow. It was at least 20 years old, but that made it all the more impressive—it was the kind of motor whose price went up, not down, with age and its condition was immaculate. Nothing in the world could have looked less like a paddy-wagon. To add injury to insult, the blond guy standing beside it was far too well-dressed to be a cop in drag, and far too cadaverous to be a merchant.

*Oh shit! Joe thought. Wrong place, wrong time, wrong man. Some embarrassment coming up.* He still wasn't scared; he just assumed that it was a case of mistaken identity—that the Incredible Hulk had plonked his mechanical-shovel hands on the wrong target.

Unfortunately, the blond guy didn't make any protest to that effect. He just opened the back door of the Silver Shadow. The Hulk bundled Joe into the back seat, and followed him in. The blond man got into the front passenger seat, directly in front of Joe, while the third one got into the driver's seat.

A little light in the ceiling above Joe's seat flicked on, showing him a wall of glass separating him from the blond man, who immediately turned to scrutinize him.

It was when the blond man showed no indication at all that he was aware of the fact that his bully boys had picked up the wrong man that Joe finally conceded to himself that he might be in real trouble.

The light thrown out by the tiny bulb was eerily blue, and so much of it reflected back off the glass partition that the face of the blond man seemed ghostly, less clear in Joe's eyes than his own reflection, but Joe could see that the face was thin and very pale except for a curious yellowy tint, old-looking without being wrinkled. The blond hair was groomed to perfection; the dark jacket, white shirt and dark silk tie were equally precise.

If there had been any doubt remaining in Joe's mind as to the fact that this was a very wealthy man, the fixtures and fittings in the back of the Rolls would have dispelled it. The outside was 1980s but the inside was very turn-of-the-millennium, gadget city in miniature. The only jarring presence was the huge man who sat beside him on the tan leather seat, still and silent—almost as though he had been *switched off*. He wasn't spectacularly ugly, in spite of his porcine physiognomy, but he was utterly androidal. He reminded Joe of a ventriloquist's dummy blown up to 10 or 12 times natural size.

"I'm sorry, guys," Joe blurted out, uneasily, "but you have the wrong person. I'm a customer, not a dealer. In any war you've got going, I'm just a civilian."

The driver was the first to speak. He asked the blond man, curtly, if it was all OK.

"Yes," said the blond man, after looking Joe over very carefully. "That's him. Let's go." His voice, muffled by the glass partition, was as ghostly as his face. Joe's stomach felt queasy.

As the driver started the engine, Joe tested the door, thinking that there might still be time to bail out and run, if he could just move fast enough to evade the android wrestler—but the door had a childproof lock which ensured that it could only be opened from the outside.

The driver slid the Rolls into gear and it moved off smoothly. Joe



# the two guys grabbed him as extra twist to the excitement than a total disaster.

was astonished by how quiet it was inside; the noise of the engine was no more than a purr.

"I'm not a dealer," Joe said, insistently, desperate to get the point across in spite of the partition. "I'm a postgraduate student at Imperial College. Check my wallet—it has my library card, with a photo. I'm not whoever you think I am."

"You're Joseph Redmond Rutherford, born 20 September 1979," said the blond man, who was still twisted in his seat, looking back at his prisoner. "There's no mistake, Joe, I assure you of that." His softened voice sounded more pitying than hostile—and that, to Joe, was the most menacing thing of all.

**J**OE KNEW THAT THE BLOND MAN MUST BE TELLING THE truth about there being no mistake; no one could possibly have found out his middle name without doing some serious research. It was his mother's maiden name, given to him out of some weird sense of propriety, and he never used it—not even on forms which asked for his full name. Anyone might know his date of birth, but only someone who'd researched him thoroughly would know Redmond. "What the hell is this?" he asked, anxiety making his voice even louder than it needed to be to overcome the resistance of the glass partition. "Who are you? What do you want with me?"

"This is nothing personal," the blond phantom said, with all the polite charm of Boris Karloff playing a mad murderer in some ancient monochrome melodrama. "I want you to know that. If possible, I'd like you to understand why this is happening, because I think you're entitled to that—but you'll have to be patient, and not interrupt too much. You'll need an open mind, Joe, if you're even to begin to understand."

"I only came to score a handful of Es," Joe said, frantic to make the point. "Strictly for personal consumption. I'm just a user—I'm not in deep. Anyone who says I am is a liar."

"We know exactly what you are," the blond man said, equably. "Don't waste time trying to tell me about yourself—strange as it may seem, I know far more about that than you do. My name is Roland Vane, by the way. I'm an Imperial man myself, as it happens—BSc Psychology 1995."

*He can't be only five or six years older than I am!* Joe thought. *He doesn't look a day under 50!* But his panic paused in its rise as he realized that this couldn't really be any kind of drug-war scenario. *What it is*, he told himself, sternly, *is a puzzle. Play it as a game—a PC role-playing game. Don't let all that training go to waste. Life itself is just a blind ride in Virtual Reality. Keep cool.* He was cool enough. It was Thursday night, after all—the nadir of the week—and he was stripped fit for the lab and the Trocadero. An arcade ace who could rack up a way-above-average score on his first trip harpooning spacewhales could cope with Roland Vane, BSc and zombie master.

Aloud, he said: "I didn't know psychology was such a good line in these materialistic times. Does everyone from the Class of '95 own a chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce with all the trimmings?" It seemed like a good line, until he glanced at the man beside him and felt a renewed chill in the pit of his stomach. The Hulk really didn't look vacant in any ordinary way—he actually looked like a 22-carat zombie: a brutal body without the least sign of mental activity. The King's Cross buzz was all gone now, and Joe knew that true terror was taking slow possession of him, from top to toe.

"No," the blond man said, lightly. "The others are mostly marking

time, waiting for the economy to stop diving into the unplumbed depths of depression. Not that things are any better in organic chemistry, even for people with doctorates. A pity, that—if only ICI or Wellcome were hiring the way they were in the '90s, you might have a bright future in front of you, instead of a life of...*crime*, I'm afraid, doesn't quite do justice to the horror of it."

"What the fuck do *you* know about my future?" Joe retorted, knowing even as he framed the question how bizarre it was.

The answer was even more bizarre. "Far too much," said Vane, a little too faintly; Joe had to concentrate hard in order to hear him through the glass. "Everything, and then some. That's how I got to be so rich so quick. To me, the future is an open book, written in blood—but hopefully not in stone. It's an interactive book, you see...like one of those choose-your-own-adventure books that were everywhere when I was a kid. You know the PC versions, of course—intimately, according to my information. That's what we're doing, Joe: choosing our own adventure, trying to get through the infinite maze of possibility to the best possible middle."

"You're crazy," Joe said, reflexively. But he knew, as he jerked out the words, that there was some kind of zombie sitting next to him, and that he was in a very, *very* expensive car, and that they knew his middle name—and he was scientist enough to know that a madness with this much method in it was a very methodical madness indeed. Before the blond man could say another word, he blurted out: "What are you going to do with me?"

**H**E DIDN'T GET AN ANSWER, BUT HE HAD WATCHED enough *films noirs* to know what it signified when some poor sucker was taken for a ride. He knew what childproof doors and android wrestlers meant in the melodramatic lexicon of movies and PC games. He couldn't yet quite believe it, but he knew.

*Perhaps this isn't happening*, he thought, dutifully testing out the only other approach. *Perhaps it's not real. Maybe it's some kind of bad trip and I only seem to be awake.*

It wouldn't wash. It was a non-starter, and even if it wasn't...the one thing he was certain of was that he had to play the game *as if* he were playing for his very life.

Joe studied his surroundings carefully: the rain-spattered windows, dead screens, the polished wood of the minibar, digital uni-phone, superfax, and CD-ROM apparatus. They were all too distinct to be figments of a dream, but not as precisely-defined and primary-colored as anything you'd find inside a VR machine. Anyway, the runaway train of his own thoughts was too sharp, too rigorous. No matter how strange and out of control his predicament might be, he was in full possession of *himself*. He could feel the bundle of pills in his pants pocket and wished that he'd bought something stronger—something strong enough to make all this go away.

"Nobody can see the future," he told the blond man. "All the people who ever claimed they could were just charlatans. It doesn't even make *sense* to believe you can see the future. You get paradoxes."

"I didn't believe it either, Joe," said Roland Vane, still looking ghostly through the glass partition, with Joe's own reflection strangely superimposed on his face. "I'm a scientist, just like you—I need proof before I believe anything, and I need *extra* proof before I believe anything unlikely. But when they kept on feeding me the winners—horses, dogs, shares, headline news, *anything*—there came a time when I had to believe them. When my bank balance was into seven figures, when I had the big house and the classic



# Joe's worst fears were true. He

## the classic manner, and he wouldn't be coming back. Joe

car, there was no way I could stay skeptical. And that wasn't all. I've seen you sneaking those little sidelong looks at Frank, Joe. You know that there's something *very* creepy about him, don't you? You can tell that someone else is pulling his strings. It's someone way downtime, Joe—someone who's trying to change their past. The downtimers think it can be done, paradoxes or no paradoxes. Even if I didn't believe them, I'd have to go along with them. They've given me a lot of good information, and this is part of the payoff. As I say, it's nothing personal. I really would like you to understand."

**W**ITH THE LIGHT ON IN THE BACK IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE to see anything beyond the roller's windows except for the raindrops tracking slantwise across them. Joey hadn't the slightest idea which way they were headed. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"Nowhere," the blond man said—and Joe wished that he didn't believe him.

"You can't do this," Joe said. "You just can't. I don't care what kind of proof you think you have that you're getting messages from the future, and I don't care what kind of a personality problem your over-sized friend has, *you don't have any reason to do this to me!*"

"You have to be stopped, Joe," said the blond man, softly. "You have to be stopped before you get started, or too much damage will be done. It's not just that they want to stop you killing people, Joe—in their time, everybody from nowadays is long-dead anyhow. They're not in the business of merely saving lives, and they're not stupid enough to think that wiping you out will be sufficient to eliminate the joker from the pack. They know that they might have to do this again and again and again, and that every time they do it they run the risk of ripping their own personal threads right out of the loom of fate, *but they have to try*. That's how much damage you're scheduled to do, Joe. You're a *very* dangerous man."

"Try what?" said Joe, faintly, knowing that it wouldn't do any good to keep telling the blond man he was crazy, and that he had to find out more before he could work out a better plan.

"They've been trying to get information back for a long time," Vane said, in his irritating half-whisper. "Years of their time, millennia of ours. The transmission is problematic, but the reception is the real problem. The receiver has to be a very particular kind of person, you see...it goes without saying that the host mind has to be capable of grasping the concepts involved, so that anyone pre-20th century isn't really a candidate, but there are lots of other problems too. Did you ever hear of a French psychologist called Jouvét, Joe?"

"No," said Joe, wondering what chance, if any, he might have to run when the door was finally opened, and whether there was anything to hand that might be used as a weapon, if only he could grab it and wrench it free.

"I thought not," Vane continued, infuriatingly. "Jouvét figured out that a body at the base of the brain called the pons was short-circuiting the messages sent out to the motor system by the brain during dream sleep. When he removed it, surgically, from the brains of a few experimental cats, he was able to watch the cats acting out their dreams. Sleepwalking in humans is caused by some natural disruption of the functioning of the pons. Ordinarily, you see, people don't act out their dreams—and they don't *remember* their dreams either, except for a little short-term retention and some dysfunctional imprints. Something somewhere in the brain censors dream material out from the memory system just as the pons censors the motor signals—and that same something censors out the

kind of messages the people of the not-so-distant future will learn to transmit.

"The only people who are good receivers of the kinds of messages the men of the future are sending are people whose ability to filter real experience from hallucinatory experience is impaired. Unfortunately, people like that are usually very disturbed people—schizophrenic, dysfunctional people. Anyone born like that is a non-starter in the human race, and the relatively few people who become like it *after* they've learned to function normally tend to write themselves off very quickly. The window of opportunity is very narrow, Joe, and the results of getting the message through are a trifle inconsistent. Frank has his uses for the time being, but they're limited, and the time will very soon arrive when he'll have to be dropped from the team. Peter is a lot more stable, as you can tell from his very capable driving, but when it comes to *understanding*, to the *brainwork*, there's only me. I'm probably the only person in the entire world who can really *dream true*, remember what I dreamed, and integrate it unproblematically with my real experience. I think it might be because I have hardly any dream life of my own, so there was nothing to confuse, distort or drown out the messages when they started to come through. I never had any imagination, you see—no imagination at all."

*Big joke*, Joe thought. *If this is having no imagination....*

"If dreaming is as essential as some people think," Vane went on, "the signals from the future might actually have saved my sanity, by filling a gap which would otherwise have been damaging. So you see, Joe, I have a lot more to thank the people of the future for than a long list of winning bets...although it is an impressively long list. I never win much at any one time, you see, for fear of disrupting the pattern of history too much. The guys downtime want me to be very careful about *unplanned* disruptions, in case some unforeseen change interferes with the ones they desperately want to achieve."

*He's telling the truth*, Joe thought, wondering at his own capacity for believing the impossible. *Crazy or not, he means every word, and he's going to act on his beliefs with utter conviction. If I'm to get out of this alive, I have to play the game as he defines it. Nothing else will do.* He tried hard to think of a question which would count as a *move*, which might actually give the other man pause—and he felt tremendously proud of his ability to do it. Any straight person, he knew, would be way out of his depth, but a connoisseur's interest in VR games and psychotropic drugs gave a man a different perspective on the life of the senses, with a far higher degree of adaptability built in.

"Do the guys downtime have receivers of their own?" Joe asked.

"Yes they do," said the blond man, whose sudden smile of delight seemed perfectly sincere. "They certainly do."

"And do they get messages from a single future, or from lots of alternatives?" *Jesus, I'm good!* Joe thought. *Is that a hot question or what?*

"The problem," said the blond man, calmly, "is that they don't get any *messages* at all. They get...well, think of it as static. The people who are beaming stuff to Frank, Peter and myself are of the opinion that if they can't change the past, there won't be any future for humankind—and that's why they're willing to risk eliminating themselves from the pattern of history. They really are serious about this, Joe, and they've done their history homework as carefully as they possibly can."

Joe had played lots of PC games in which he was cast as a time-traveler, as a superhero, or even as a demigod. He prided himself on being able to handle any set of rules, and to shift his axiomatic



# was being taken for a ride in was able to guess, now, where the roller was headed.

ground as quickly as he could go through the levels. "What you're telling me," he said, serenely, "is that the entire future of mankind somehow rests on me. You think I'm going to do something—invent something, I guess—which will wipe out the entire fucking *species*."

"Maybe not quite that drastic," said the blond man, serenely, "but close. There's an awful lot of future from which messages might come, were there anyone capable of sending them. The harm you're presently scheduled to do might not lead to the extinction of the race, but it appears that...."

**J**OE DIDN'T WANT TO HANG ABOUT. FOR ALL HE KNEW THEY might be only a couple of minutes from their destination. "*Appears* is the operative word," he put in, scornfully. "Has it occurred to the voices in your sleepy little head that they might not be receiving because the guys further downtime have more sense than to send anything, for fear of wiping *themselves* out. Maybe the future is absolutely hunky-dory, and they don't want to rock their cozy little boat. Has it occurred to you or your possibly-imaginary pals that whatever I'm scheduled to invent may be the foundation stone of a blissfully uncommunicative Utopia?"

For the first time, Vane frowned. *A hit! Joe thought. Score one to me!*

"I think I preferred it," the blond man said, almost inaudibly, "when you thought I was mad. I wanted to explain it to you...but I suppose, on reflection, it might be better if you *weren't* capable of understanding, or of believing."

*Oh shit! Joey thought. He thinks I'm just as mad as he is—except that because he thinks he's sane, he thinks I'm just as sane as he is...which means he thinks that I too might have some kind of hot line to the future...but maybe not the same future that his hot line links up to.*

"What exactly," Joe said, "am I scheduled to invent? Are we talking about biological warfare here, or some superpsychotropic that's going to blow everybody's minds, or what?"

"I'm not sure I ought to go into detail about that," the blond man said, uncertainly. The smile was quite gone now.

"I'll bet you aren't," Joe said, softly enough for the other to have to strain to hear him. "You're beginning to sense an Oedipus situation, aren't you? You're beginning to wonder whether your action in trying to *prevent* the prophecy coming true might instead set in train the chain of cause-and-effect that makes it happen."

He grinned, wolfishly, thinking that he had turned disadvantage back into advantage again—but he had overplayed his hand.

"The thought had crossed my mind," Vane admitted, easily enough. "Fortunately, we have the means to prevent the possibility. Oedipus' father was careless enough to leave room for the unfortunate prophecy to be fulfilled—he left the baby on the bare hillside, when a knife through the heart would have settled the matter for good and all. I'm sorry, Joe, but we can't leave anything to chance. The people downtime explained that to me. Above all else, they said, don't try to be subtle; don't mess about with warnings and suggestions—make sure. I'm sorry, Joe, but I have to make sure. You do see that, don't you? If you have your own hookup to a contingent future, you must see it all the more clearly."

It was the first explicit statement Vane had made to confirm that Joe's worst fears were true. He was being taken for a ride in the classic manner, and the intention was that he wouldn't be coming back.

Joe was able to guess, now, where the roller was headed. Construction workers were adding a sixth westward lane to the M4, widening all the overpasses at the junction with the M25, out near

Heathrow Airport. All contract-killed corpses traditionally ended up under motorway bridges. Mr Vane was right—he had no imagination. Even the Silver Shadow now began to look like a cliché to Joe's clear-sighted eyes.

"It won't do any good," Joe said, trying to sound perfectly calm and perfectly confident. "It can't. If your voices exist, so must I. If you were able to rub me out, they couldn't have been able to ask you to do it. You're bound to fail. Worse than that—this *has* to be an Oedipus situation. You're actually playing your historically-allotted part in the tragedy. You're *causing* whatever you're trying to prevent, and so are your friends downtime...except, of course, that they're not *really* your friends, are they? They're just using you, the way people do when they want something."

Joe paused for breath and raised his voice, just in case the man beyond the glass wall wasn't getting it all. "There's more to life than backing winning horses, you know, even if we leave aside the fact that your winning streak could stop any minute and surely will the moment you've done whatever it is the downtimers want you to do. Have you considered the possibility that they might be lying to you? Have you considered the possibility that they might be securing their future instead of trying to abort it? Have you considered the possibility that it's you, not me, that's being taken for a ride?"

**J**OE RACKED UP HIS SCORE, ALTHOUGH HE WAS WELL enough aware that at least a couple of his questions lacked real logical clout. He felt morally certain that he was through to the next level now, but there was still a long way to go and in this game he had only one life to lose. He had a bit of a buzz back now, just a hint of a lift, but he was under no illusions about his chances.

*If only I could design a drug to do this, he thought, I could make a million. Imagine a drug which could hype you up for virtual reality to the point where you couldn't tell it from actual reality—something to displace you inside your head as well as out! It could be done—it's just a matter of finding the censor in the brain, and knocking it out for a while. It really could be done, and I could be the guy to do it, if I can only get out of this in one piece.*

"I'm sorry, Joe," the blond man said. "There's no way you can talk me out of it. You're history." He smiled again then, and this smile turned into a laugh.

The fact that the thin man could laugh at such a pathetically feeble joke made Joe angry. He wasn't playing fair!

"If your voices really are all that's keeping you sane," Joe pointed out, changing tack again with dogged persistence, "you could lose more than a hot line to an ace racing tipster. You could lose your marbles too. You aren't playing this like a clever punter, are you? A *sensible* man would string them along, spin it out. A real horseplayer would say, 'Sure I'll do what you want, but not quite yet.' You really ought to think about your own future prospects, your own security."

"I wish I could," said Vane. "Unfortunately, it wouldn't do any good. I already have an appointment with destiny that can't be ducked. You've probably noticed that I look a little older than I am. That's because I'm suffering from a form of progeria—that's a fancy term for premature aging. Some glitch in my DNA spectrum means that my chromosome complement doesn't copy accurately enough when my cells divide, and errors accumulate at a greater than normal rate. I only have six months to live, Joe, a year at the most—and it won't be fun. When I decide to opt out, a few weeks

*Continued on page 87*





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To space or not to space,  
that is the question.

# ORBITUARY

BY JEFFREY G. LISS

*Illustration by Janet Aulisio*

ROBERT FROST WAS WRONG, PETER Glynn thought. The world doesn't end in fire, nor in ice. William Faulkner was wrong, too. The world ends with neither a bang nor a whimper.

It ends with an envelope—actually, the last of four envelopes—which Peter held in trembling hands.

The first envelope came on fine bond paper, embossed in gold with the seal of the Republic of Russia.

*Dear National Space Society Member, the enclosure began. In case you missed the newspaper and TV reports, we are taking this direct mail route to make long-time space program supporters aware that they, too, now have the opportunity to travel in space.*

*As both a humanitarian and fund-raising effort, the Republic of Russia is conducting a world-wide lottery, the winners of which will have an opportunity to spend a month in our space station Mir. Your federal government has kindly cooperated by passing a law superseding your various state anti-lottery laws to allow this enterprise.*

Peter vaguely remembered hearing that announcement, but he had dismissed it as just another half-baked publicity stunt that would fall apart, as had previous efforts, amidst bureaucratic squabbling over the fine print. But this letter seemed rather substantial. He read on.

Russia would be conducting four lotteries, one each calendar quarter. The entry fee for each was \$40. That was about the cost of NSS's dues for one year, the letter observed, but offered the possibility of actually getting into space! The winner would be flown to Russia for six months of training, including in the Russian language, and then would be sent into orbit. The prize was non-transferable, but if the lottery winner did not qualify medically, or declined to go, a consolation prize of \$1,000,000 would be paid. *All you have to do, the letter urged, is check one or more of the four boxes in the enclosed reply form, attach your check, and mail in the enclosed return envelope.*

A cover letter from NSS's Executive Director said that NSS believed the lottery to be valid, and added encouragingly that Russia would donate \$10,000 to any organization whose mailing list produced a lottery winner.

Peter put down the material thoughtfully.

Peter was a believer. As a kid in the post-Korean War era he dooled rockets everywhere, drooled over every Heinlein story he could find, and endured laughter for claiming that people would

live on the Moon. By the time of *Apollo*, however, he was in business school worrying about how to make a living. His interest in space had become more philosophical and practical. He truly believed that a space-faring civilization was crucial to the future of humanity, that it needed to be achieved before the population explosion closed this 20th-century window of opportunity, and that

space technology would boost the general technological base.

He joined first the visionary L5 Society and then its more sedate successor NSS. He had become resigned to never getting into space himself, but he said, "I do what I can to support the cause."

Yet the dream of thundering rockets never entirely faded, of seeing from space the long clean horizon of that blue marble Earth, of floating unchained from the bonds of gravity.

That night he casually showed the Russian letter at the dinner table.

His family more or less tolerated his infatuation with space. In fact, when Space Camp first opened to adults they urged him to put his body where his mouth was. The weekend there had been one of the most exhilarating of his life, and it took three months before he completed his re-entry into daily living.

Liz, his wife, shrugged. "You always said playing the state lottery was just throwing away money. I don't see how this is any different. We have better uses for the money. Besides, you can't give up your accounting practice for a year."

His younger daughter, Diana, the *Star Trek* fan, said to go for it.

Alison, his more practical older daughter, said they could use the \$1,000,000 consolation prize. And, she joked—was it a joke?—that if he won and didn't take the consolation prize, he probably wouldn't have a family to come home to afterward!

Then the subject was dropped.

But that night he wrote out a check for \$40 and deposited the response form in the mail. That was the second envelope.

The third envelope, months later, came on a sunny Saturday, without any forewarning that his world was about to be upturned. It was another gold-embossed letter from the Republic of Russia. This one came registered.

*Dear Mr. Glynn, the letter began. Congratulations. You have won the Republic of Russia's first space lottery and are invited to fly for a month to the world's only space station, Mir....*



Please check the "Yes" or "No" box on the enclosed form and return it within one week in the enclosed envelope....

The letter blurred and Peter sat down.

"Oh my God," he thought. "This can't be happening. Things like this don't happen in real life. What do I do now?"

His wife came downstairs. "Who was at the door?" Silently he handed her the envelope.

As she read the letter, blood drained from her face. "Oh, my God." She paused, then glared accusingly. "You actually signed up for that lottery, didn't you."

Peter nodded mutely. She continued, "Well, you can't go, you know."

The two kids came flying down the stairs. "What's going on?"

Liz told them, "Believe it or not, your father won that Russian lottery to go into space."

"That's wonderful!" Diana shouted. "Way to go, Dad!"

"You can't be serious," Alison said. "Wait a minute, wasn't there a million dollar prize if you don't go? Hey, we're going to be rich."

"Stop it!" Peter exclaimed. "This is a shock to me, too. I don't know what I'm going to do. Just let me think." With that he went upstairs to his study and closed the door as Liz called up, "There's nothing to think about!"

Amidst shelves of the 500 or so science fiction books he had collected over a lifetime, Peter sat at his desk and buried his face in his hands. His mind whirled in circles, and the morning passed.

In the early afternoon the phone began ringing. "Hello, this is Tom Brokaw at NBC." ABC, CBS, CNN, XYZ and a dozen local stations and newspapers soon followed. In between was an excited call from the NSS Executive Director. "We are so happy for you," she said. "You have what we would all die for. We'll be riding that rocket with you."

And then his relatives and friends called, but Liz took most of these. Peter didn't know quite what to say to anyone.

They talked more after dinner. "Peter, you have to be practical," his wife said. "You know that you can't quit work for three-quarters of a year. You have to support your family. Besides, didn't you tell me, when we were worried about your possible disability, that once an accountant's clients scatter among other firms, they are unlikely to disrupt their relationships again in order to return to their former accountant?"

Peter nodded. He felt like saying, "But you still have your data processing job, and I would have receivables coming in for a few months, and we do have some savings, and though money might be tight, the finances could be handled." But not liking to discuss money matters in front of the kids, he kept the thought to himself.

"You would be away from me and your children, too. What kind of fathering would that be?"

"Soldiers are away from their families," Peter muttered.

"Just take the million dollars," Alison said. "You could go back to Space Camp and you can go down to Cape Canaveral and watch the shuttle take off all you want. And you can retire."

"How can I not go?" he asked them plaintively. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I am the only one of 5 billion people who can do this. Haven't I always philosophized that if life presents you with a unique opportunity, it is karma, destiny, and you should take it, come what may?"

"And when it's over, maybe I won't be able to get my accounting practice back, but surely I can find something to do."

"Be realistic," Liz said. "You're over 50. The papers are full of people over 50 looking for work. And you've said there aren't many lateral hires of accountants at that age. I don't think you'd be happy flipping burgers at McDonald's."

"Do it, Dad," Diana said. "In your secret heart, that's what you've always lived for."

Peter went for a walk, under a half moon that smiled down on him. Beckoning? Mocking?

Even his mother was unsympathetic. "It would be rather selfish

WHEREVER HE WENT,  
HE WOULD BE THE  
"MAN WHO FLEW IN  
SPACE" OR THE "MAN  
WHO DIDN'T GO."

if you disrupted all their lives for a lark like that!"

Five days passed. And nothing was normal. He couldn't concentrate during the days, and people seemed to look at him differently. At night he kept staring up at the stars. Each time he looked at himself in the mirror, he wondered how he could face himself if he "chickened out"? Or how he could spend the next 30 years chained to the planet's surface, always wondering what it would have been like?

But he had always shouldered his responsibilities. How could he desert his family?

Wherever he went, he would be the "man

who flew in space" or the "man who didn't go." Whatever he did, the world he knew was ended.

He stared at the two blank boxes on the response form. Yes. No. Yes. No.

If it was karma, perhaps he should flip a coin. No, he would decide himself.

With a final deep breath and a silent prayer that he'd have no regrets, he checked a box and then quickly stuffed the form into that fateful return envelope.

He walked to the mailbox and, with trembling hands, inserted the envelope. For better or worse, his new world was about to begin.

"HURRY, DAD, OR WE'LL BE LATE FOR THE SHUTTLE LAUNCH," DIANA SAID, as she finished dressing.

Peter looked up. Diana's excitement was apparent, and even Alison seemed interested. Liz, ready on time as always, was straightening up their Cape Canaveral hotel suite. *How come I feel so detached?* he wondered. *I always longed to see a liftoff, and now I will. A million dollar consolation prize can do a lot.*

But apparently not everything. He sighed. Where was the joy? He had thought after the lottery things would return to normal. But he found himself withdrawing from his previous social life. Having shown so little confidence in his ability to support a family that he would throw away his life's dream—how could he face his peers? Increasingly he stared out of windows, doodled instead of concentrating, reduced his calling on clients, and watched his accounting practice shrink.

He had followed his head, not his heart, rather than risk losing his family. But he was losing them anyway. He was distancing himself from his kids, feeling more like a cowardly role model than a responsible one. And it was hard to look at Liz, who now seemed more jailer than inspiration.

Almost half a lifetime still lay ahead. Would he spend those years haunting the launch pads? Did he still care?

His reverie was interrupted. The telephone rang.

AT THE BEDSIDE OF HIS HOTEL SUITE, PETER GRABBED THE RECEIVER, wiping the sleep from his eyes.

"Good morning, Dad." It was Diana. "I just wanted to wish you luck with your speech."

Peter sat up. "Thanks, honey. Wow, did I just have a weird dream. A nightmare, actually. Like I had decided not to go to *Mir*."

"Wow is right," Diana said. "Good thing you did go. Or they never would be paying you to make all those speeches. And you wouldn't have wound up having so much fun."

"You're right," he said. "I took a chance, and it paid off. A civilian in orbit rekindled public interest in space, and I have been swamped with these invitations and consulting assignments. And next fall I start teaching accounting part time. I'm looking forward to that; it beats doing the same old drudgery for another two decades. After that, I'm sure there will be something else. I feel reborn, excited again."

"Give my love to Alison and your mom."

He hung up and smiled. He had followed his star, and now maybe his descendants would reach theirs. □





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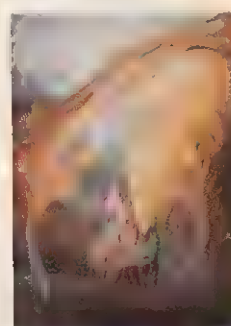
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In a savage world, once you have eliminated the impossible,  
the truth may be wizardry, and a barbarian detective  
learns that solving some mysteries may be far from elementary.

# *Sherlock the Barbarian*

BY DAVID GARNETT

*Illustration by Mark Hannon*

**I**t was very late when someone pounded on the door. Because my master was still awake and writing in his journal, he answered the summons before I was able to respond. "Something's happened in the north tower," said a voice I recognized as that of Tarmasan, the chancellor. "You must investigate."

After helping my master to dress, we hurried across the dark courtyard. The northern tower was the guest turret, where King Sarvion, his family and entourage were staying. There was a cordon of sentries at the base, and we could hear shouting several floors above.

"What is the explanation for all this untoward activity?" my master asked the sergeant-at-arms.

"Prince Miklam is dead, sir."

"In what manner did he meet his death?"

The trooper was named Korlap. He was a veteran when I first arrived at the castle; he must have been nearly 30 years old by now.

"Magic," he said.

"Ha!" sneered my master, as we passed into the tower and made our way up the ancient steps. "I confidently predict that this occurrence will produce severe repercussions."

That seemed obvious, but I said nothing; I never did unless I was specifically requested to speak.

Our route was next blocked by King Sarvion's own guards. My master glared at them and said: "I advise you to desist from obstructing my progress."

Perhaps one reason why he didn't believe in magic was that he had no need of it. He was tall and imposing, his commanding voice and penetrating stare as powerful as any spell.

The guards immediately lowered their swords and stepped aside, and we entered the room where King Brenok and King Sarvion were yelling and swearing at each other.

Royal families aren't very impressive. After countless generations of inbreeding, most of them have the brains of slugs. That doesn't really matter, but they also tend to look like slugs. Brenok was small and fat, Sarvion fat and small.

Prince Miklam was also there, but like me he remained silent. His excuse was that he was dead. He lay naked on the floor, and he cer-

tainly wasn't very impressive. Princess Zalex wasn't missing much, I noticed. They were to have been married that afternoon, sealing the alliance between Cinnubia and Lyverba. It seemed the wedding was off. The Thousand Year War would continue.

"I'm sorry about this," said King Brenok, shrugging. "It's just one of those things."

"One of those things!" shouted King Sarvion. "This means war!"

It always meant war. That was the natural state of the world. There had been peace for the last month, and nobody knew what to do with themselves.

"He should have been properly guarded," Brenok claimed.

"He was," said Sarvion. "But he was killed by sorcery. Cinnubian sorcery!"

"I have serious doubts about the validity of such a premise," my master said. He was kneeling on the floor, examining the corpse.

"Who's that?" asked Sarvion, and he reached for the dagger at his side. "Leave my son alone! Don't you dare desecrate his sacred body!"

Brenok reached out a restraining hand. "He's one of my advisers. If anyone can find out what happened, he can."

"I know what happened! Miklam was killed, murdered by your foul magic. I don't know why he ever wanted to marry your poxy daughter. He must have been under her evil spell."

"Your son never met my daughter until yesterday's feast, you know that. Anyway, you're not going to let a little thing like this prevent the alliance, are you? How many of your family have died over the years? How many of mine? What's one more? Don't you have another son for Zalex to marry?"





HANNON



"Yes, but...but never mind that. It's a matter of honor, of principle. You must pay for Miklam's death."

"I assure you, my dear Sar—May I call you Sar? You can call me Bren—I assure you, it was none of my doing. How can I make up for it? How can I persuade you? What if Zalex also dies? Then we'll be all square. I can have her killed immediately, if you wish. And you can choose the method of execution. I can't say any fairer than that, can I?"

"No! Her death can't make up for my son's. She's only a girl. All your daughters must die!"

"Come on, Sar, I can't have all eight or nine of them killed."

"Why not? Think of how much dowry you'll save."

"That's true." Brenok paused, thinking—or trying to. "No, it's not on. How about killing two of them?"

"It's got to be six."

"All right, all right, I'll meet you halfway. Four, and that's my last offer."

"Four. Agreed—but I get to choose them. Zalex and the other three."

"A deal."

The two monarchs spat in their palms and shook hands. Another triumph for diplomacy.

Now that was settled, Brenok suggested: "All your family is here, so how about my eldest son marrying your eldest daughter instead?"

Sarvion nodded slowly. "I suppose so. You've gone to a lot of expense for the wedding, after all. It would be a shame to waste it. And it would save the alliance." He nodded again, more decisively. "It's time that what's-her-name became a bride. Yerlo, yes, that's the one. She must be nearly 12."

"Fine, I'll go and tell Onsel he's to be married."

"Same place, same time, I presume?"

And that would have been it. The groom was dead; long live the groom. Miklam was already forgotten, his death of no consequence. Until my master spoke.

"I have reason to believe," he said, "that the prince was killed by a man, not by magic."

The two kings looked at him. By now he had turned the body over.

"You will observe the blood which has leaked from the wound in the prince's back. He died from a blade impelled upwards into his heart. Judging by the magnitude of the incision, I would venture to suggest that he was stabbed by a knife of military issue."

Sarvion gave my master the same disdainful glare as he would the lowliest of serfs, but the other monarch took him by the arm and led him toward the door.

"I suggest we bury your son here," said Brenok.

"Good idea. He might start to smell before we could get him home."

"So as not to cast a shadow over the wedding, we ought to hold the funeral after the ceremony."

"With the execution of your daughters in between," added Sarvion. "Perhaps we could bury Miklam and Zalex side by side in the cemetery."

"That would be very nice," agreed Brenok. He gestured toward my master. "See to it." Then he and Sarvion were gone.

**E**XECUTIONS, FUNERALS, THAT SHOULD HAVE been easy enough to arrange. Too easy. My master's face was as expressionless as ever, but the look in his eyes meant he had his own ideas about what he ought to do.

"Miklam was murdered," he said quietly. "It is my intention to discover by whom." He stood up and went to the door. "Captain of the guard!"

"Sir!" said the Lyverban officer who entered in response to his call. He was almost as broad as he was tall, his face scarred by ancient battle wounds.

"I wish to be apprised of the identity of the person with whom the prince spent his final hours upon this earth."

The soldier frowned, the creases making his face appear even

more scarred. "What?" he said.

"Who was the prince with last night?"

"No one, sir."

"I do not look favorably upon mendacity, officer. Tell me the truth. There must have been a woman, a slave girl. It is traditional, is it not, for the groom to bed another female upon the eve of his wedding?"

"Not last night, sir. The prince had been, er, drinking and, er, he was in no fit state to...er..."

"You are under the impression that his highness was inebriated?"

"I don't know about that, sir, but he was—" the soldier glanced around, then lowered his voice—"he was very drunk, sir. Couldn't hold himself up, let alone..." He winked slyly.

"Were you the person who initially surveyed the prince's inanimate being?"

"Er...what?"

"Did you find the body?"

"Yes, sir!"

"I wish to be informed precisely what transpired between the hour when the prince retired for the evening and the moment whereupon you discovered his unfortunate corpse."

**T**HE CAPTAIN WAS THE PRINCE'S PERSONAL bodyguard. He had been with Miklam all the previous evening, while the prince celebrated the end of his bachelor days with his brothers. He had helped the drunken groom climb the north tower to his chamber, put him to bed, locked the door, stayed outside all night, hearing no sound from within, then unlocked the door again before dawn to prepare the prince for his wedding.

"His royal highness was alone inside a locked room, sir," he concluded. "He could only have been killed by magic!"

Such was the reasonable conclusion. Reasonable to everyone except my master.

He gestured for the Lyverban to depart, then closed the door, leaving the three of us inside: my master, the dead prince and myself.

"For the purposes of hypothesis, I will accept the bodyguard's account of the nocturnal events which occurred within these walls," he said. "Supposing that this door was indeed securely sealed all night, what other means of access is there? None, save the embrasures."

Because it occupied the corner of the turret, there were two sets of windows in the prince's chamber. Each of these was a hand's-breadth wide, designed for shooting arrows from—not for the admission of either light or an assassin. Considering the height of the tower, only a very athletic dwarf could have entered it.

My master studied the arrow slits. "No one could have infiltrated themselves here, although it is conceivable that a knife may have been hurled through the aperture to claim the prince's life. It would have been extremely difficult to have slain him in such a fashion whilst he was abed. The victim, however, met his demise upon the floor. Perchance he heard a noise, arose from his slumbers, and was then dispatched by such a thrown knife—the weapon retrieved by a length of twine affixed to the hilt." He glanced through the embrasure, judging the distance to the ground. "I believe I may prudently discount that theory." He walked across to the body. "Did a sound awaken him? Was that the reason why he departed his bed? Or did he arise for the more mundane purpose of relieving himself?"

He gazed at me as he spoke, but he didn't expect any reply. I obliged his expectations.

He continued: "Every murderer must perforce have a reason. Find that reason, and one will find the murderer. Who would wish Prince Miklam dead? Who would benefit most favorably from his untimely departure from this mortal world? His younger brother, the next in line to the throne, who would inherit the crown of Lyverba in his stead? That is indeed a possibility. Yet why should a rival sibling wait until now to eliminate Miklam? Such a nefarious deed could have been accomplished with more facility within his own native land. I steadfastly believe it is no coincidence of fate that the prince



was slain the night before his marriage to Princess Zalex. Some person unknown was extremely desirous that these nuptials were not consummated. Should I identify that person, then I have discovered the killer!"

In those circumstances, Zalex seemed the most likely candidate. No one had a better reason to dispose of Mikdam before the wedding.

My master always carried his journal, and he now drew it out and spent a considerable time writing on one of its pages. He knelt down and surveyed the body again, examining the wound. Then he stood, his clenched fist slowly rising and falling as he imitated the actions of an assassin. He glanced at the floor.

"What is this I find before me?" he asked, crouching down to inspect the stone slabs.

Dirt, I thought.

"Blood!" he exclaimed.

That was to be expected after someone had been stabbed, but my master seemed to believe it was of great significance.

"See! The prince's body fell supine there, yet some of his blood is here. And here. Also here." He moved across the room, pointing. "The killer incautiously stepped into his victim's blood, thus leaving traces of his footmarks upon the floor." He followed the gory trail toward the wall. "It would seem that the phantom assassin vanished into solid stone."

It had to be magic. Any fool knew that. Except my master.

"This is a castle," he stated. "Hence what may be found herein? Secret passages!" He beckoned to me, and I approached. "Behold! The bloody handprint of the killer! Position your hand there."

My master was reluctant to place his own palm upon the imprint because he suspected a trap. I guessed this by the way that he retreated to the far end of the room when I pressed my hand against the dark outline. It was larger than my own hand, and still sticky.

"Exert pressure upon the rock," he said.

I glanced up at the ceiling, wondering if I could avoid a plummeting block of stone. Or perhaps it would be I who did the plummeting, as the floor fell away beneath me and I plunged into the abyss below.

I closed my eyes and pushed.

The stone turned. I opened my eyes in time to notice that so also did a section of the wall, rotating like a door.

"Ah-ha!" cried my master, and he hurried forward to inspect the dark passage which had been revealed. He reached for one of the burning torches which illuminated the room, thrusting the flame into the blackness and taking a step toward the unknown. Then he drew back and passed the flaming brand to me.

"Into the darkness!" he commanded.

I moved forward, discovering a narrow flight of stone steps which spiralled down toward the heart of the castle. It seemed that they lay tightly coiled within the main staircase, and must have been built countless centuries ago as a means of escape in case of siege.

My master followed close behind while I descended the cramped circular course, cobwebbed and cold. We heard the slow grating of stone upon stone from above, as the opening sealed itself again. Down and down we went, far deeper, or so it seemed, than the height of the tower, until we came up against a blank stone wall. This time, there was no bloody handmark to indicate our route.

"The one and only solution," said my master, after due consideration of our predicament, "is to press each and every stone."

I admit I wasn't too optimistic, having seen all the whitened bones which lay scattered around us. Trampling upon human skulls and cracking ancient limbs beneath us, we began searching for an exit. There were so many stones, far more than could be counted.

Holding the torch up against the wall, I finally located a draught of air which indicated that certain blocks of masonry did not fit as well as they ought. By a process of elimination, I found the stone which was the key. It swung away, as did a part of the wall, and we passed through.

We emerged into another dark and twisting passage, along which we proceeded until we heard voices in the distance. We slowed our pace, then noticed two figures in the gloom ahead of us. Recognizing

them as sentries, we realized we were within one of the guardhouses.

There were far more sentries on duty throughout the castle than usual. This was partly because of the wedding, partly because the Thousand Year War had halted and other work had to be found for the troops.

We had arrived at the base of the north tower, at the side opposite the main entrance, and we could easily have passed by without the guards noticing. My master, however, coughed to announce our presence. Both guards spun swiftly around, their pikestaves becoming entangled.

"Halt!" ordered the first of them, although we weren't moving.

"Who goes there?" demanded the second, although he could see who we were. He was frowning, wondering where we had come from. "Friend or foe?"

The first sentry glared at him. "I'm supposed to say that. I've got seniority around here." He turned toward us again. "Friend or foe?"

My master sighed. "Friend," he muttered.

"What?"

"Friend, you deaf imbecile!"

"What?"

"He said, 'Friend, you deaf imbecile'."

"Don't call me names, you idiot!"

The first guard threatened his companion with his pikestaff; the second guard backed away and lowered his own weapon, pointing it menacingly at the other trooper.

"Tell me," said my master, interrupting their quarrel, "have you been on duty throughout the hours of darkness?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Yes, sir!"

"I should also like to inquire whether any other person took advantage of yonder covert path this very night."

They glanced at each other.

"Has anyone else come in or out of here tonight?"

"No, sir!"

"No, sir!"

"Very well. May I therefore beg your indulgence whilst I scrutinize your knives?"

"Er," said the first guard.

"Um," said the second guard.

"I should inform you that my words are no idle request. They constitute an official order. Show me your knives."

"Oh...yes," said the first sentry as he handed over his weapon.

**M**Y MASTER INSPECTED IT CLOSELY, MEASURING the width of the blade with his fingers. He held it up to the pale morning light, sniffed at it, ran his fingertips across the sharpened edge, then touched the point to his tongue.

"I believe that you recently sliced a fresh apple with this very blade," he said. "Am I correct in my analysis?"

"No." The guard shook his head. "But I did step in some dung, sir, and cleaned it off with my knife."

Even then, my master's expression didn't change. Neither did he spit. He returned the knife, then held out his hand toward the other sentry. He inspected the second knife in silence, careful to avoid touching the blade even with his fingers.

"What is the appointed hour for the changing of the guard?" he asked, giving back the knife.

"Soon, sir," the second sentry replied.

"When the bugle sounds, sir," the first guard said.

My master walked away a few paces, produced his journal and made several notations, then folded his arms and waited. I stood one pace behind him, also waiting.

The sun was beginning to rise above the crenelated east wall when at last the bugle call was heard, the signal for the night sentries to be replaced. Only twice each day were all the castle guards on duty at once.



"Sergeant-at-arms!" called my master, as he crossed the courtyard to where the new troops stood arrayed. "I should be indebted to your good self if you were to order all the men under your command to present arms. To be specific, I wish them to display their daggers."

Korlap managed to conceal most of his annoyance. "Yes, sir. Whatever you wish, sir."

He went through his morning inspection, quickly checking every one of his troops. My master joined him, not so quickly examining each knife and also the hands and boots of every soldier. He had no success finding any sign of Prince Miklam's blood. When the sentries began their day's work, they were replaced by those who had been on duty during the night. This second inspection produced the same lack of result.

The troops were dismissed. We remained in the courtyard with the sergeant-at-arms, and my master made another entry in his journal.

"I would now appreciate the manifestation of your own secondary combat weapon," he said.

Korlap drew his blade, its point aimed at my master's heart. A flip of the wrist, the knife spun through the air, and its handle was held toward my master.

"From its immaculate condition," said my master, having accepted it, "I would surmise that you have recently cleaned this implement."

The trooper laughed. "I never clean my weapons! Blood is the best thing for keeping a blade sharp and free of rust."

I noticed that the knife was so polished that the metal gleamed in the dawn's bright rays.

"To my expert eye," continued my master, "this burnished blade becomes a significantly more incriminating piece of evidence than one dripping with fresh blood. I also observe that your hands are unnaturally clean, from which I deduce that you must have recently washed them—washed away that very same blood, the blood of your royal victim."

Korlap stared at him in amazement. "Washed?" he said, in a puzzled voice. He gazed at his palms. "With...water?" It was as if the word belonged to another language. He shook his head.

"You cannot pretend, Korlap. I accuse you of the murder of Prince Miklam, for which you will doubtless be duly executed."

The sergeant's hand seized the pommel of his sword.

My master turned to look at the grounds of the fortress.

The castle was awakening. Slaves and servants and lords and ladies were beginning to appear in the courtyard.

"Is it also your intention to essay a fatal assault on my own life, Korlap?" he asked. "You ought to be aware that upon this occasion there are numerous witnesses within the immediate vicinity."

He paused while making a further note in his book, then continued: "We shall request an audience with King Brenok. You may make your confession and humbly beg his majesty for mercy, and there is an infinitesimal likelihood that perhaps your death may be marginally less painful. Lead on."

**T**HE SERGEANT SPUN ON HIS HEEL AND began walking toward the royal tower. My master followed, holding his journal in one hand and the knife in the other. I followed my master.

"Korlap possesses more cognizance of the labyrinthine architecture of this castle than anyone else," my master said. "Having such excellent opportunity to deprive the prince of his life, he thus became worthy of suspicion from the very genesis of this investigation. Yet as well as opportunity, a killer must simultaneously possess the requisite motivation. Why should Korlap have committed such a deed? He is a soldier and hence paid to kill. I suspect such to be the circumstances in this instance. He was merely the weapon. I have yet to distinguish the culprit who deployed that weapon, the true assassin."

I yawned. I felt hungry and wondered how long it would be before this episode was over and I could break my fast.

The four guards in the two sentry posts at the entrance to the royal tower jumped to attention when they saw Korlap approaching them.

"Halt!" they cried almost in unison. "Who goes there? Friend or foe?"

Korlap snapped back his answer. I didn't quite hear what he said, although it wasn't the ritual reply. The second word was "off".

He strode past the sentries, and we were close behind him. But instead of climbing the spiral steps, he pounded on the door at the foot of the staircase. A few seconds later, a figure appeared in the doorway.

"What's going on?"

It was Tarmasan, the chancellor.

For a moment my master seemed surprised. "I have successfully identified and apprehended Prince Miklam's killer," he said.

The chancellor glanced at the sergeant-at-arms.

"Korlap? Splendid! He's exactly the sort of thug I'd have chosen if I wanted someone ruthlessly butchered. In fact, he's exactly the thug I did choose."

It was the first time I ever saw my master at a loss for words. He stared at Tarmasan in astonishment. Even after taking a breath, all he could say was: "You?"

"That's right."

"But...why?"

"Why? Isn't it obvious? It is to everyone else. Come inside. The sun's above the battlements; it's time to open a bottle of wine. We'll have a drink and I'll explain. Wait there, Korlap."

My master and I stepped inside, and Tarmasan closed the door behind us. He poured two goblets of wine and passed one to my master, who set Korlap's knife down on the wine table. The chancellor raised his vessel in a toast, and my master automatically repeated the gesture. They both drank.

"Miklam had to die because of the treaty," said Tarmasan. "There must be no alliance. It's bad for business. It's costing too many people too much money, from the provisions merchants in the capital right down to the village fletchers and blacksmiths." He shrugged. "It's simple."

"I regret to admit that I do not comprehend your reasoning," said my master. "The alliance shall continue, because Prince Onsel will marry Princess Yerlo this very day."

"Onsel will be dead before sunset. Poisoned wine at the banquet."

My master glanced at his goblet, but Tarmasan chuckled and drank more wine.

"Brenok and Sarvion will soon get the idea," he continued. "Cinrubia and Lyverba are enemies. Always have been. Always will be. The Thousand Year War will continue. Nothing can stop it. Nothing will stop it." He sipped at his wine once more, then set the goblet down on the table. He picked up the sergeant's dagger and studied it. "I confess that you have my admiration. Who else could possibly have deduced that it was Korlap who slayed Miklam? You're a very intelligent man."

"I appreciate the compliment." My master nodded in acknowledgment, permitting himself a slight smile.

That was when Tarmasan stabbed him. My master stared at the chancellor, then down at Korlap's knife buried in his chest. The journal slipped from his fingers, he dropped his goblet, and he also fell to the ground. Spilled wine and shed blood mingled on the stones.

"Now solve that, you clever bastard!" Tarmasan told him. He laughed, drained his wine, then laughed again.

He picked up my master's journal from the floor, thumbed through the pages, then flung it into the fire. His gaze passed in my direction for a moment, and he almost noticed me. When he opened the door to admit Korlap, I left.

It didn't pay to be too clever. What was the point of detection without the backing of the appropriate legal processes and an independent judicial system?

If you had brains, it was best to keep quiet.

I was a sex slave. I didn't need to be smart.

Cleverness had killed my master. Being able to read and write hadn't saved him. I could do neither, but it didn't matter because I had nothing to write about. □



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# THE RIVER'S TIME

*Continued from page 45*

warmth felt like needles now and my eyes burned. The light from the windows was blurred yellow, and hurt. I felt wound tight and anything might release me. Too fast and I'd explode, too slow... maybe slow was right, maybe I'd been too fast all along and I'd lost a sense of rhythm.

"We've got to get back on the river, Gam," Lor said. The needles grew thick and pried apart the casing around me. Lor reached across the table and touched my hand. The river. I'd lost the river. Hil, then Mother, then Darny, finally Rel—currents, eddies, bars, and rapids. I closed my fingers around Lor's hand. I could go back to the river, though, if that was my choice. I wondered why my face was wet then, and why Lor was holding me and rocking me.

We'd been in Charic 22 days. I was stunned. Rel had been back once already and deposited profits in the bank.

Our shares were large enough to buy a boat. It hurt that Rel hadn't even bothered to look for us, but she must've thought I'd try to take *Leander* away, and I couldn't say that she would have been wrong. The boat we found was unimpressive compared to a barge like *Leander*—too small, too limited in function—but I liked her at once. Sleek, fast, good engines. There were four small cabins for passengers and a tiny hold we thought we might transport perishables in, but none of that mattered. She was riverworthy and ready to leave dock.

Lor and I sailed up and down the Manassa to the various small townships. As often as not we had no cargo and no passengers, but it didn't matter. We were lost to the waters, pretending to have a place to go and going with all possible speed, then staying till our excuses ran out and the river called again. I hoped to run into Rel somewhere. On the open river would have been good, where nothing might give either of us a place or an excuse to hide. It didn't happen. We returned to Charic often enough, but always too soon or too late, and the only thing to show that Rel had been there was a fatter balance in our accounts.

One day I wandered to the edge of the spaceport. I stood at the perimeter and stared across the chalky-white field laden with service vehicles and landers and smaller starships. The huge merchantmen orbited above, out of sight, unable to land because of their size. In my mind I imagined one of those immense things taking cargo for days until it finally hoisted sail and lumbered off to the stars. The sense of their existence was clear—credit, commerce, communication—but the sense of people wanting to go still eluded me. I couldn't see it. In all those shapes and motions, risings and fallings, what had Hil and Darny recognized that I did not? I left more confused than ever.

The river was enough for me, just as *Leander* had been enough. But "enough" is too personal for comparison. It hadn't been "enough" for Rel, what we'd had. Nine Rivers hadn't been "enough" for Hil or Darny. My own "enough" seemed so much simpler, though, so much easier to fit into.

When I returned to the boat someone was waiting. He sat with Lor on the prow. He wore a trim beard and expensive clothes and as I stepped aboard he looked at me with an open gaze and a smile. "Gam," Lor said, "this is Captain Amsed of the Starship *Procyon Twin*. He has a proposition."

I leaned against the railing. "Business?"

"Absolutely," Captain Amsed said. "I run a passenger liner. Part of my lading, though, is in perishables and Nine Rivers is a regular stop. I've got six shuttles for ferrying passengers and I always have a few who want to come down at every port and 'absorb the clime' as they put it. More than ever lately. It occurs to me that if I had a regular tour service here I could turn more of a profit and advertise Nine Rivers."

"We've never been much in the way of a tourist world," I said.

"True, but Charic has a large trade now in hospitality for visiting off-worlders. It might be worthwhile to get in on what could be a new trend right at the first stage."

I was skeptical, but Lor persuaded me to try. We already took a few tourists now and then. I wasn't sure I wanted it to be a regular chore, but Amsed named some fees and by nightfall we'd worked out most of the agreement. *Manassa Tours* was born that night and a week later we took six off-worlders for a 500-kilometer junket up the river. They were a curious bunch. They wanted more than anything to see the "real life" along the river. Passing by the charred ruins of Taylor Cove—the inhabitants had drifted away to find other communities after the night we tore down the locks—became a regular run, and I even began telling stories of the night it burned, embellishing the details shamelessly. We bought two more boats and rented an office in Charic.

Soon we had other captains contracting for our services. Amsed was a full partner in the enterprise and made a share from every run, so there was no conflict of interest involved. Rel continued depositing money for us. We stopped trying to catch her in dock. We were too busy with our own venture and I no longer resented Rel. I told myself that she was leasing our places on *Leander* so she would have room to grow, which was true enough. The size of each deposit increased each time.

Simultaneously, almost unnoticed, the size of my "enough" expanded. Business can take you places you'd never otherwise go. I had to go to the spaceport to meet some new clients and negotiate an expansion of *Manassa Tours*. In four years we had grown large enough to offer stock and I'd hired someone to handle all the details and com-

plications that that entailed, but Lor and I sometimes had to be directly involved. We'd been spending less and less time on the river. This was the first time I'd ever been beyond the fence. This was alien territory, the first step off Nine Rivers. A short ride to one of the shuttles waiting in a launch cradle and a few minutes after that you would be in space. I was nervous and excited through the entire visit. I kept expecting to turn around suddenly and see Hil. Or Darny. Instead I saw only business people. Off-worlders, well-dressed, carefully groomed, polite, and utterly disinterested in the river. At least, I thought so. They knew money, they understood that, as well as I knew the river.

Commerce was the water they traveled and these waters were deep. I said little, letting my adviser do most of the talking.

Between us, documents were drawn up that enabled another expansion and secured more money and charted a course for further profit. Everyone was happy when it ended, including me. I left quickly and touched as little as possible. I feared contamination. Once I was back in Charic proper I realized that I had *enjoyed* the visit. The clean lines, the power, the absolutely inarguable knowledge of *purpose* innate in the place was seductive. Shaken, I hurried back to the offices. Lor was waiting in my room.

"Rel left us a message," she said.

"Rel..." She handed me a piece of paper.

"Thought you would like to know, Darny Caples is back. Sighted in Winston Commune. Best, Rel."

I frowned. "That's all?"

"Seems so. Do you want to go find her?" Lor asked.

"Rel?"

"No, Darny," Lor said.

"Yes," I whispered.

"Thought so. I had our boat readied." She smiled. "Trip down the Manassa seems like a good notion anyway. We could use the time away from all this." Lor didn't ask about the meeting until we were well away from Charic. I told her what had happened and tried to describe my feelings about the port. She stared out at the river, silent till I finished, then nodded. "We need to get back to this," she said, nodding toward the water. "We're drifting too far. Like Rel. I wonder if she even considers us family anymore."

"She left us the note," I said.

Lor grunted, "I'm sorry, but 'best, Rel' doesn't sound much like familial appreciation. Duty maybe, like the money. A chore."

"She didn't have to tell us at all," I said. Lor shrugged. "I'm not sure," I said, "that we can get back to this."

Lor was quiet for a long time. "Neither am I," she said finally.

What had been nearly a two-week journey on *Leander* took only five days in our tour boat. We had never named her, which hadn't struck me as inappropriate before. There were other vessels that had no name other than that of the family that owned them or a number.



The registry read "Manassa Tours #1" and I generally called her simply *Number One*. As I neared the Winston Commune wharf I wondered if we ought to name her properly.

A new warehouse stood near the old one. We trudged up the hill, then beyond. The town lay in a shallow valley, nestled against a small lake. Beyond were kopfibre, rice and soy fields. Most of my life I had stopped at this place on *Leander* to pick up the cargoes left by the Returnists, yet this was the first time I had ever seen the town and the fields. I'd never seen cultivated fields before and now I found them disturbing. I stood on the apex of the hill and stared at them, knowing what they were, but not recognizing them. There was nothing familiar about them. With a shock I realized that the irregularly-spaced shadows strewn across them were people working in the rows. Lor nudged me and I staggered the first few steps down the road. The buildings were mostly made of wood, like other small settlements along the river, but the construction was smooth and sophisticated, almost seamless, in a way that lent the entire village an organic quality.

We were watched from windows and doorways. We didn't belong here and we weren't welcome. I looked intently at every face I saw, hoping to spot Darny. At the end of the street a group emerged from one of the buildings and approached us. I recognized the man at their head: Sage Mendolson. Older, his beard longer, grayer, his face a little more melted with worry, but still straightbacked, with a long stride. We stopped in the middle of the street.

"What do you want?" he asked. "This is our town and we do not welcome outsiders."

"Obviously," Lor said. "I've had better hospitality at Taylor Cove." Sage Mendolson frowned uncertainly.

"We're looking for Darny Caples," I said quickly. "I heard she was back." Something strange—a mixture of wariness, sadness and frustration—animated his features for a moment.

Then he shook his head. "Leave. You want nothing with Darny."

"Then she's here," I insisted.

"Leave!" he bellowed.

"Not till I've talked to Darny," I countered.

He started to say something more, then hesitated. He looked from side to side at the people with him, then selected one. "Moran. Take them to see Darny."

The young man named Moran frowned. "But, Sage—"

"Do it! Then see that they leave." Sage Mendolson turned and walked away from us, followed by everyone but Moran, who scowled at me.

"You from the port?" he asked.

"From it," Lor said, "not of it."

"Hm. Fine distinction," Moran said. He led us down a narrow alley to another street.

"How long has Darny been back?" I asked.

"Six months, a bit more maybe," he answered.

I was excited, anxious to see her. I remembered the day she'd left and was surprised that all the pain I had felt then was no more than a vague, gauzy memory, but the pleasure I'd known with her, the luxury of her company, was clear and immediate. He took us to a house near the edge of the village. At the door he stopped and turned to us.

"She should never have left," he said. "Do you understand? She shouldn't have left."

"That was her choice," I said. Moran shook his head, but said nothing and opened the door. He took us to a room on the second floor and let us in.

Darny sat in a chair by a window and stared out. She looked around when we entered, but it was only curiosity, and not much of that. I might have denied it, gone up to her and pretended otherwise until I couldn't, but those kind of games never changed anything. The truth was she didn't recognize me. Or Lor. Or much of anything.

"She came back and wanted to be part of Winston again," Moran said. "But she couldn't, not the way she was. Not with all that...poison...in her head."

"Her memories? You mean her memories?" I asked.

"No...the devices. We're Returnists. We reject your world," Moran said. "She had to be returned to what she was to be one of us again."

"You mean," Lor asked, "her links had to be removed?"

"Yes."

"Who removed them?" I asked.

"We did. We tried. Our surgeon isn't unskilled, he—"

"The implants augmented what she was," I said. "They were part of her. The extra memory nodes were—"

"So we discovered!" he hissed. Darny looked over at us again, a slight frown pulling at her mouth. After a moment she turned back to the window.

"She should never have left," Moran said.

"No," I said. "She should never have come back."

Moran's face twisted for a moment. He wanted to argue, tell me I was wrong, but some truths can't be ignored. "She wanted to be part of us again. That's all. She said that it was all too much, out there. She said she didn't know...." There were tears on Moran's face.

My eyes were dry. I was angry. Uselessly angry. Lor and I didn't talk much on the way back to Charic. Mostly we felt the river through the deck, let its rhythms set the time for our thoughts.

We passed *Leander* on the way. I thought of heaving to and insisting on talking to Rel, but didn't. There was nothing to say and no reason to invent something. Rel had found enough for herself, that seemed clear. I wondered if I would and if I'd know it before it became too much. Ah, well. All in the river's time. For now I have dreams and wounds enough. Let them heal each other. □

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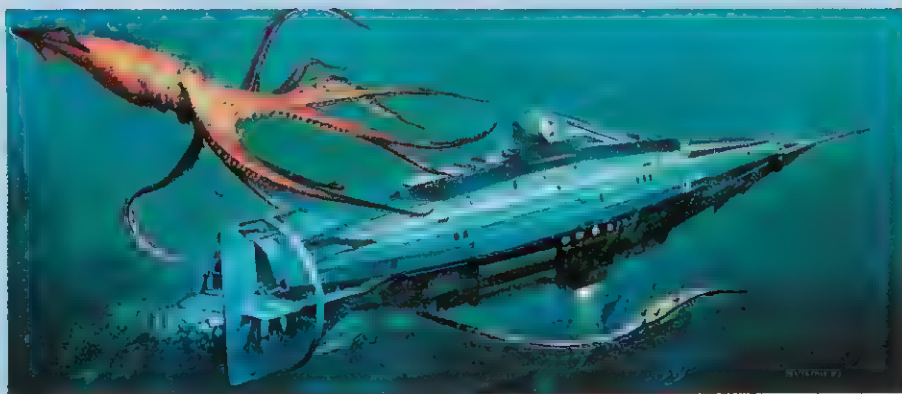
With Vincent Di Fate's photographic renderings of things alien, who needs the Hubble Space Telescope?

# FUTURE DI FATE

BY BEN BOVA

**"I** DIDN'T REALIZE I LOVED ILLUSTRATION UNTIL I WAS 40 years old," says Vincent Di Fate.

Strange words for one of the best illustrators in the business, a man who has won the Hugo Award for Best Professional Artist, the Frank R. Paul Award for Outstanding Achievement in Science Fiction Illustration, the Skylark Award



for Imaginative Fiction, a painter whose work has adorned countless book jackets and magazine covers, whose clients have included IBM, The Reader's Digest, the National Geographic Society, CBS, NASA, and many, many, others.

Then he explains, "I've absolutely loved science fiction ever since I was 4 years old and saw my first science fiction movie, in 1950."

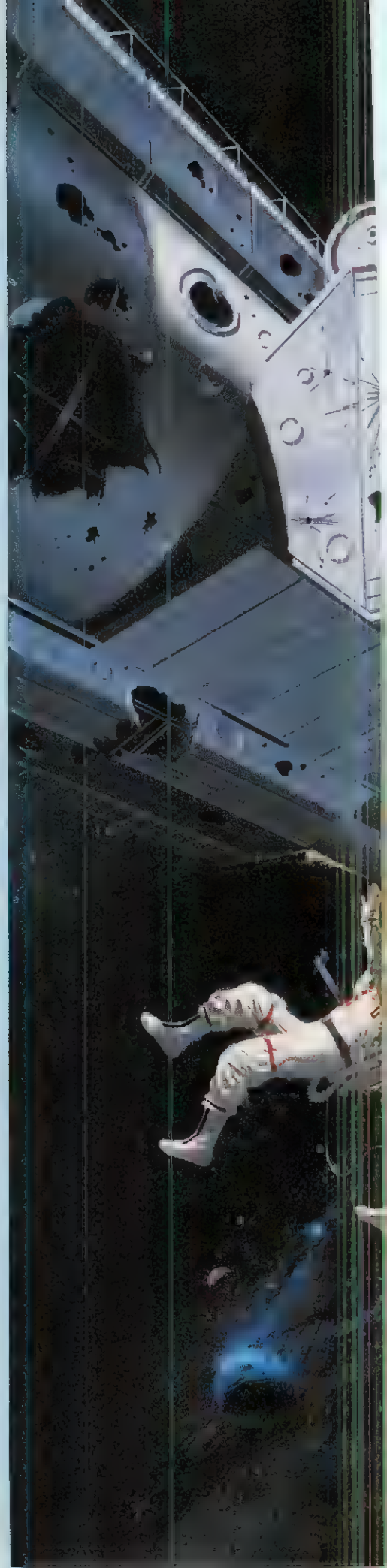
That film was the low-budget *Rocket Ship X-M*. It started a lifelong love affair between Di Fate and science fiction.

Vincent (Vin or Vinnie to his friends) began reading science fiction books as a child and then discovered SF magazines in the early 1960s, while he was still a teenager. He wanted to make SF movies, and actually

started work in the film industry in New York City. It was not until late 1968 that he tried his hand at magazine illustration—after a stint teaching elementary school art in Larchmont, New York.

He took his portfolio of drawings to John W. Campbell, Jr., the editor of *Analog*. Within a few months he was one of *Analog's* steady contributors. The rest, as they say, is history.

**I** MET VINNIE WHEN I BECAME *ANALOG's* editor, in 1971, after Campbell's death. At first I thought he was friendly but shy, diffident to the point of being self-deprecating. Only after getting to know him thoroughly did I find that behind that wry





*Spacers examine a battered derelict in this scene from John Blair's novel, Bright Angel. FAR LEFT: Jules Verne accurately predicted the submarine in 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea; Di Fate makes it live.*







smile and soft voice was a man of great intensity, an artist who had the absolute respect of all his peers, a painter who cared deeply about his own work and about the field of science-fiction illustration.

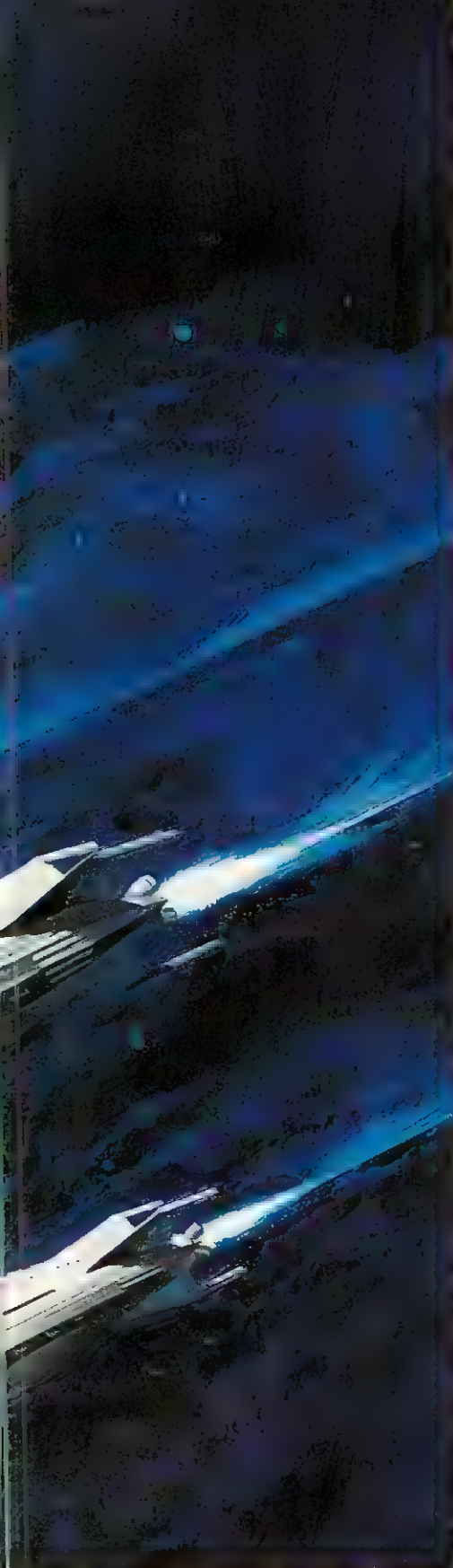
Many are the times when he and I would go to lunch in mid-town Manhattan and he would spend the time trying to show me the

inner foundations of illustration, the importance of composition, the skills that a painter must have in order to convey a scene to the magazine's readers. Slowly (very slowly, I'm afraid), I began to understand what he was driving at.

One of the biggest problems we faced in those days of the 1970s was the fact that

*Analog* and the other SF magazines were digest-sized. Interior color was too expensive for them, and although the front cover illustrations were done in color, they were still frustratingly small and had to carry not only the magazine's logo, but cover lines describing the contents, as well. And that ugliest of all intrusions, the bar code label.





LEFT: A space war is about to begin in Susan Schwartz' 1986 short story "Survivor Guilt." ABOVE: Di Fate depicts the choices the future holds in this illustration for *Penterra* by Judith Moffet.

composition. The circulation manager wanted something powerful enough to stop a pedestrian from across the street and make him come over and buy the magazine.

Some illustrators came close to nervous breakdowns over those monthly conferences. Perhaps Vinnie did, too, but if so, he did it in private. When he met with us he was strong without being abrasive, cooperative without sacrificing his ideas or ideals.

You see, what Vinnie wanted on the covers he painted was a powerful picture, one that satisfied the most demanding critic either of us knew: himself. Time and again, the issues of *Analog* that bore Di Fate covers were among the best-selling issues of that year. He knew how to convey the essence of the story he was illustrating, and at the same time, produce a powerful, memorable picture that attracted potential buyers to the newsstand.

**H**E TRULY DOES LOVE SCIENCE FICTION. Although his commissions from NASA and the aerospace industry earn much more money than science-fiction illustration can offer, Vinnie still spends more than 70 percent of his efforts on science fiction. "The advertising and other

work pays for the science fiction," he says. The "other work" includes a hatful of philatelic commissions, first-day covers that are treasured by collectors, including 36 dinosaur stamps.

Is science fiction illustration different from the other types of illustration? Illustrators working on "mundane" subjects depend heavily on photographs of the models or objects they are illustrating, Vinnie points out. "There's precious little photography in science fiction. You're always dealing with things and places that don't exist, except in the writer's imagination. The illustrator has to use imagination and instinct rather than facts."

Imagination, instinct—and talent. Di Fate's science fiction illustrations are renowned for his masterly painting technique and his sharp-edged, magnificently realistic handling of futuristic hardware. In 1980, Workman Publishing Company put out *Di Fate's Catalog of Science Fiction Hardware*, a must for any SF aficionado. This book is a feast for the mind, as well as the eye, for Vinnie not only shows his paintings, but explains in fine detail the thinking he went through to create each glowing picture.

His talent and his dedication are evident in every illustration he does. Look at his

I recall many four-sided discussions that almost erupted into screaming battles when the art director, illustrator, circulation manager, and editor (me) met each month to plan the next issue's cover. As editor, I wanted an illustration that would show the reader something of the stories inside the magazine. The art director wanted a pleasing





ABOVE: *Di Fate's first book cover sale was for Ron Goulart's Broken Engine, though its publication was delayed for years.*

RIGHT: *In the cyberpunk future of David J. Skal's Antibodies, people deliberately mutilate themselves to replace body parts with machinery.*

"Solar Ship" or "Space Colonies" paintings. The hardware is clean and vivid, the astronomical backgrounds detailed and as realistic as modern scientific knowledge allows.

**W**HEN I WAS AT *ANALOG* I SWIFTLY learned that if a story presented a tough problem in envisioning futuristic hardware, Vinnie was the illustrator who could solve that problem. He read the story manuscripts I gave him, searching for the scenes and the characters that would work best in an illustration. He translated the writer's words into an artist's vision.

And that, I found, was the very heart and core of the illustrator's task: to make ideas visible, to make the words of the writer into pictures that we can all see and marvel at. Great illustrators, like Vincent Di Fate, serve as guiding beacons for us; they translate ideas into pictures, they use their finely-trained talents to create images that we poor benighted mortals could never see for ourselves. They are our eyes into the future, and Di Fate is among the best of them, by any measure.

Typical of his dedication, in 1986 Vinnie

accepted the responsibility of being chairman of the Society of Illustrators' permanent collection. He found himself heavily involved in housing, protecting and, in many cases, restoring the works of the nation's greatest illustrators, legends such as Norman Rockwell, Howard Pyle and many others.

"That's when I finally realized that I love illustration," he says. At last he came to recognize that illustration can be a work of art in its own right, and that his own work had a value far beyond mere decoration or sales promotion.

It took a long time, but like the hero of a mythic saga, he had to go out into the world and have his own trials before he could appreciate his home turf.

Also typical of the man is the fact that he is spending more and more of his time teaching, helping others to learn what has taken him decades of sweat and perseverance to master. He teaches classes in science fiction illustration at the School of Visual Arts in New York and at the Fashion Institute of Technology. In a sense, Vinnie is helping to train his own competition. But in a larger sense, he is doing what he has always done: enlarging and enriching the field. □









## COMICS

By Adam-Troy Castro

### Barry Windsor-Smith trades in a barbarian for an alien vampire.

*Rune is savage and ruthless, a far cry from the modern day seductive vampire stereotype. Art by Barry Windsor-Smith.*



**F**RANKLY, THE COMIC BOOK INDUSTRY NEEDS A new superhero universe about as much as Clark Kent needs contact lenses; and yet we still can't dismiss the superhero entirely... not when there are still talented people still working in the form.

Take Barry Windsor-Smith, creator of *Rune*.

Windsor-Smith's career in comics is a long and distinguished one, even if his actual output is small compared to the reputation it's earned him. When he started at Marvel in 1968, drawing such series as *X-men* and *Daredevil*, he was just another Jack Kirby imitator. Then—in part, he said recently, because he was willing to work cheap—he got the assignment to draw the company's version of Robert E. Howard's barbarian hero Conan. When the book not only worked, but also became one of Marvel's longest-running hits, it was in large part due to the visual groundwork laid by Windsor-Smith (adapting excellent scripts by Roy Thomas). His work on those first 24 *Conan* issues made him one of the hottest artists in the field.

Then he left comics. The resale cost for the Windsor-Smith issues of *Conan* rose to three figures. Windsor-Smith kept busy doing other things, but his fame in the field he'd abandoned just kept growing and growing; though *Conan* remained a top-seller, under other artists, the letter columns were still filled with pleas for Windsor-Smith to come back.

In 1985, he did just that. Starting up where he started the first time, he illustrated some memorable issues of *X-men*. Then, for the anthology series *Marvel Comics Presents*, he wrote and drew "Weapon X," a multi-part

serial revealing for the first time, in exquisitely horrific detail, the high-tech secret origin of the popular mutant superhero, Wolverine. As had happened with *Conan*, almost 20 years earlier, his *Wolverine* comics became instant collector's items.

Hotter than ever, Windsor-Smith went to Valiant, where he proved he had a substantial sense of humor as well, by writing and drawing several issues of a bizarrely anarchic book called *Archer and Armstrong*. Leaving that book, he went to Malibu Comics, which had recently launched a line of superhero books set in its own self-contained "Ultraverse." The Ultraverse was an appropriate place for *Rune*, a vampire of sorts, whose existence spans all human history, and who straddles the twin genres of science fiction and horror.

Windsor-Smith introduced the character (co-created by Chris Ulm) in 11 three-page vignettes—snapshots, really—that appeared on the flip side of all eleven Ultraverse books shipped in the month of October.

The vignettes that introduce *Rune* are designed to be enigmatic; they show us the reader little glimpses of him, his past, the way he operates, and the problems that confront him. None comprise a complete story; most make little sense without close consultation of the others. All are beautifully drawn by Windsor-Smith, who will be exploring the character at greater length when the three-issue series starts in February.

*Rune* is a blue-skinned, bat-winged vampire of unknown—probably alien—origin, who has been pre-dating among humanity for much of recorded history. Unlike most vampires we've seen in recent years, he is not a suave and sensual gentleman, with a code of personal honor and a well of a hidden nobility. No, this bloodsucker is a wholly inhuman creature, with wholly inhuman motives. He looks wholly inhuman as well, with a bumpy, unlovely anatomy that resembles the human only until you examine the way he moves and you're able to calculate just how his skeleton must depart from the human. Nor is there anything romantic about his behavior or erotic about his predatory ways; when he takes an unwilling victim, it's with the sudden violence of a beast leaping for the throat.

His ruthlessness is most graphically demonstrated in one of the earlier vignettes, which shows *Rune* in the Africa of 303 AD, ruling a primitive tribe that worships him only because it's failed in all its attempts to kill him. *Rune* hasn't bothered to learn their language, the narrator informs us, because he knows he will soon kill them all.

This is, to put it mildly, not an extremely likeable guy. His downfall begins in 1895, when, in human guise, he confronts the pioneering physicist Nikola Tesla, and hypnotically compels him to describe his discoveries on the dynamic energies of the electromagnetic spectrum. *Rune*, who can feed on energy as well as blood, plans to dine on the forces soon to be released by man's technology... and we next see him in 1952, at the A-bombing of Eniwetok, when he races directly toward ground



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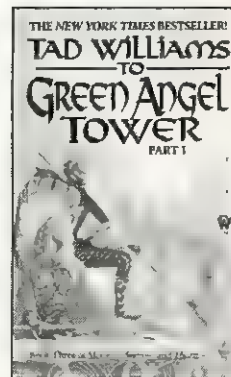
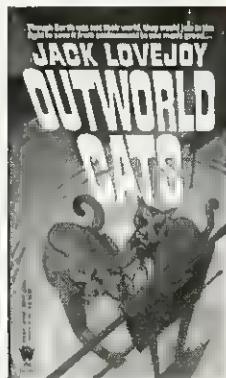
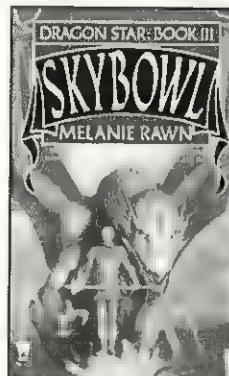
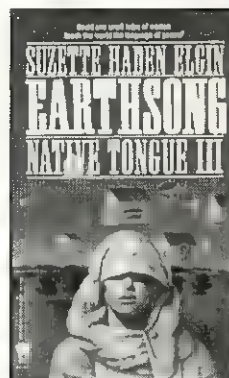
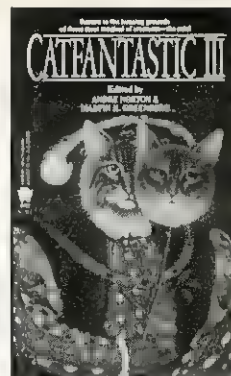
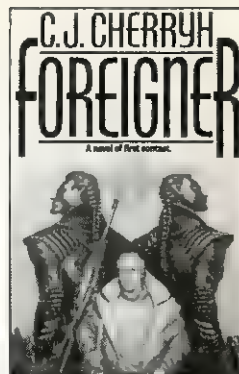
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zero in a misguided attempt to feed off the energies released by the explosion.

The blast leaves Rune burned and smoldering. The radiation leaves him with an excruciating case of slow cancer that is still killing him by inches 40 years later, as the 20th century draws toward the millennium. The vignettes detail his increasing weakness as, in a world now populated with Malibu's line of superheroes, he seeks a cure for his condition.

Windsor-Smith's scripting, while definitely a notch above the usual standards of superhero comics, still suffers a bit too obviously from purple-prose disease. *Rune's* most compelling element is Windsor-Smith's artwork, which brings power and menace to even relatively quiet scenes of Rune sitting cross-legged in the desert, rolling the alien crystals he uses as a private fortune-telling kit.

In the scenes where we actually get to see Rune in action as a predator—scenes that could be hackneyed or dull, from our over-familiarity with decades of previous vampires in novels, comics and movies—Windsor-Smith's art, driven by the randomness of small details, gives the violence a chaotic charge that remains all his own. The two-page spread where Rune crashes through a glass window of a teenager's bedroom is a textbook example of the number of cool things that can be done with shards of glass; and the resulting fight, in which, thanks to an unexpected case of mutant superpowers, the kid turns out to be startlingly adept at taking care of himself, is viscerally exciting to a degree that comic-book fight scenes frequently aspire to but all too rarely achieve.

Some comics have both great writing and great art; some comics have neither; some present writing that fails to satisfy, coupled to great art that compensates. *Rune* belongs to that last category. And if the story is just a framing device for Windsor-Smith's striking images, then so be it. On that level, at least, it's done its job. □

### RECENT AND RECOMMENDED

*Donna Matrix* (Reactor, 48 pages, full color, \$2.95) is a new comic book for which the artwork has been computer-generated rather than drawn with pen or ink. Michael Saenz, the company's publisher and editor in chief, has been behind computer-generated comics from the beginning, when he produced *Shatter*, the first computer-generated comic book, for First Comics. Now he has formed his own company to show that this new way of producing comics is more than just a novelty. Saenz, along with co-creator Norm Dwyer, presents this tale of a future sexbot accidentally coded with the software for a battle robot. She wreaks havoc on those around her, as sort of a Terminator with cleavage. The heralded artwork has a lush glow, but what remains to be seen is whether this way of creating comics represents a mere marketing gimmick, or a genuine advance in the creation of comics.

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# TELEVISION

Continued from page 23

The action is still there, but you see a softer side of Jake. *TekLab* is more an all-out actioner with a little touch of comedy."

"The themes and the tongue-in-cheek approach are present in the novels," says Gindell. "But the movies aren't a straight transfer from page to screen. Rather we're regenerating the stories for film, shaping them specifically for dramatic and visual presentation."

*TekWar* features some 280-odd effects, from traditional blue screen to advanced laser lights, but it's the computer work that cast and crew are most excited about. While the next shot is being set up, a tall, lean guy arrives and starts sidling up to selected crew members, murmuring, "We've just finished cyberspace. Wanna see it?"

The guy is Bob Munroe, head animator. He's an art school graduate and self-taught programmer who's done some commercials. *TekWar* is his first large dramatic work, and today he's completed the first large sequence, six minutes in cyberspace created from *Prisms*, an off-the-shelf program. Since everybody else is still working, I get to be the first one to see it.

We crouch over a small monitor in the upstairs computer department as a couple of underground hackers trace someone on the net. Cowgirl sits in the chair and jacks in. Abstract, translucent shapes fill the air around her. She begins gesturing, the shapes change and move, and we shift into her point of view as she hurtles through cyberspace. But she's not alone. Elsewhere, a sinister black-clad man also travels the net, flinging punishment and pain at the hackers. It's an elegant and thrilling sequence.

The cyberspace that floats around the operator is Roloff's idea. He wanted the increased drama of simultaneous action in cyberspace and the real world. "But they hadn't designed their cyberspace and I was allowed to create what I wanted," says Munroe, sipping on one of the dozens of Coke cans that litter the lab. On another screen, the team is running color tests on the cryoprison sequence. Semi-transparent coffins spiral in a double-helix from a stories-high central column. A grappler attaches one to the core elevator and we move higher and higher with it. The effect of size, depth and reality is extraordinary.

There's already talk of a fifth movie after *Tek Justice* wraps, and possibly a series. "We know Universal wants some of the Action Pack elements to go forward," says Roloff. "And *TekWar* is unique, it has a flavor of its own."

The first of the four *TekWar* movies is scheduled to air the week of January 17. The following episodes will air several weeks apart—check your local listings for exact dates and times. □

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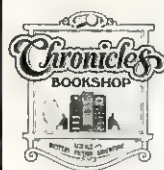
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## SCIENCE

*Continued from page 29*

getting along with one another in those close quarters. I'm not sure of the details now, but I was entertained at the time.

**BEASON:** I think most writers realize things are not going to be the 1950s ideal—once a colony gets serious, you'll have all types of social strata around. For example, in Kevin Anderson and my *Lifeline*, we showed three radically different colonies—a "low tech" Filipino colony, a high tech multi-national colony, and a Russian colony (this was back during the cold war, guys!) that mapped cultures onto the technology.

**HALDEMAN:** I have dozens of pages of notes and diagrams that I used to generate the habitats for the *WORLDS* trilogy.

**SF AGE:** How did you create what has not yet been created?

**HALDEMAN:** Well, I'm no engineer, but I can do algebra and so forth. Most writers just recycle other people's ideas; I tried to make everything up from first principles. I basically worked from the inside out—what do people need to be comfortable, and how could you build something inside of an asteroid where they could live for generations and still resemble human beings? I also had other colonies that were not so successful—like a lot of American writers, I put tongue firmly in cheek and made a really dumb Soviet colony.

**BEASON:** Right, Joe. Kevin and I tried to make the point that you're never going to lose what defines people as a culture, but yet, people will always adapt.

**HALDEMAN:** Actually, people don't always adapt. Cultures die out. Cultures are dying out now. My colony was basically a rock with everything interesting on the inside. Nothing but plants under glass on the outside.

**SF AGE:** How about some predictions, guys? When do you anticipate we will get an inhabited space station?

**HALDEMAN:** When we have a healthy economy, if ever again.

**BEASON:** Something just struck me, what Geoff had said about using space resources to build our space station. Since the hardest energy problem is getting past our gravity well, we should take advantage of the stuff that's already up there to build it.

**SF AGE:** Tell us a bit about what was on the drawing board originally, what the space station was supposed to be, and what it was cut back to?

**HALDEMAN:** We had a space station, then half a space station, then a quarter of a space station. And we're going to rent *Mir*, maybe.

**SF AGE:** Has renting *Mir* been seriously floated, Joe?

**HALDEMAN:** Buying it, Scott. They need the money and we need the space.

**LANDIS:** The cost of *Mir* depends dras-

tically on the Russian economy. Right now, they'll fly somebody to *Mir* for a few weeks for about \$10,000,000.00.

**BEASON:** I think using *Mir* is a great idea—but can we depend on the Russians not to dissolve?

**SF AGE:** Wasn't Elton John going to do that, Geoff?

**BEASON:** John Denver.

**SF AGE:** And was he serious?

**HALDEMAN:** I think he was serious.

**BEASON:** He was frowned on by State.

**HALDEMAN:** He could sell a lot of records from orbit.

**LANDIS:** Cosmonauts complain a lot about *Mir*. Doug, were you suggesting using external tanks a moment ago?

**HALDEMAN:** One problem is that you have to allot a certain amount of fuel to boost the external tanks into orbit. That fuel is already allocated for the next several years.

**LANDIS:** It takes surprising little extra fuel to take an external tank into orbit.

**BEASON:** On the drawing board: cheap access to space where we could go to produce miracles. What happened: everyone and their brother wanted to hang something on it, escalating the cost and extending the time line. Hopefully what will happen is we'll build smaller, cheaper, faster, better. That is, launch things in a cost-effective way—Single Stage To Orbit (SSTO)—and build up, don't send the whole mess up at once.

**BEASON:** What's it going to take to get us to back a true Lagrange colony?

**HALDEMAN:** It looks like we need SSTO for any kind of serious space industrialization.

**BEASON:** Profit motive?

**HALDEMAN:** Altruism hasn't worked.

**SF AGE:** Here's a controversial one—who is more likely to back a space station—a Republican administration or a Democratic one?

**BEASON:** I don't think the administration matters. It's what Congress will swallow. I served under both Bush and Clinton at the White House—and they both supported it (for different reasons). Dick Darman (Office of Management and Budget Director under Bush) supported space station because he had vision; Clinton administration supports it because of jobs. Either way, we've got to convince Congress.

**HALDEMAN:** I think it's less a matter of Republicans and Democrats than the health of the economy at any given time. The public perceives this kind of effort as a luxury. Of course they're wrong.

**BEASON:** Good, Joe.

**SF AGE:** So how do we change that perception?

**BEASON:** Benefits, benefits, benefits. And vision.

**LANDIS:** I think we should change it by being bold and taking a new initiative.

**BEASON:** Like ...

**LANDIS:** A manned exploration of a near-Earth asteroids might be a good start.

**HALDEMAN:** The answer "education" is



silly. It has to be manipulation. What about the delta-vee for a near-earth asteroid, Geoff?

**LANDIS:** As low as about 4 km/sec out and back, Joe.

**HALDEMAN:** You mean from LEO (Low Earth Orbit), Geoff?

**LANDIS:** Yes, from LEO.

**BEASON:** Geoff, that's the same as to Mars - but without the risky landing.

**HALDEMAN:** Interesting. I think it would be a good use of money and material.

**BEASON:** If we can get to LEO, nothing can stop us. But that's the problem.

**HALDEMAN:** What we need is a lot of mass in LEO. That means SSTO; that means HLLV (Heavy Lift Launch Vehicle).

**LANDIS:** I'd like to see a commercial effort try it—but they won't, until they see exactly where the profit is.

**BEASON:** *Clementine* is a start (that's an unmanned flyby by BMDO—Ballistic Missile Launch Organization—the people who brought you "Star Wars"), but I agree with Geoff. An asteroid mission is easier than a Mars mission (actually safer), and it could jumpstart our enthusiasm. *Clementine* launches this January.

**SF AGE:** What do you recommend an average person do who wants to support a space station? To whom do they write? What do they ask for?

**BEASON:** Their congresscritters.

**SF AGE:** And just say, keep backing space? Or is there a specific project they can push for?

**HALDEMAN:** It wouldn't hurt to e-mail the President. Somebody's counting those responses.

**BEASON:** Letters to Dan Goldin, NASA Administrator help—he actually quotes letters to him in his speeches.

**HALDEMAN:** I don't think we have to drum up support. I think we need to convince rich people they can make a lot of money out of this.

**BEASON:** How about a \$10 billion grant from Bill Gates to get a chip manufacturing plant up there? Or investment—not grant?

**HALDEMAN:** And a lot of those rich people are in the government, and thinking about their life when they're out of the government.

**BEASON:** We may not even need that much money, Geoff?

**HALDEMAN:** We shouldn't feel constrained by idealism. That may be what got us into it, but that's not what's going to get the money boys into it. This planet isn't big enough for us. The alternatives to "space humanization" are depressing, ugly and apocalyptic. If we don't move off this planet, we're going to exhibit the kind of behavior other animals do in crowded cages, amplified by our particular talents: a Dark Age that will make the medieval period look like a summer vacation. We have an abundance of technology that can be used for good or ill, and an overabundance of evil, and no place to escape that deadly combination. □

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## GAMES

By Steven Weaver

# Blade Runner's designer brings his magic to your home computer with *CyberRace*.



If you like the sleek look of SF today, you can thank designer Syd Mead. BELOW: The difficult *CyberRace* as seen from the cockpit of your ship.

**I** DON'T THINK ANY OF US DROP DEAD FROM SURPRISE when press releases appear these days announcing spaceships and aliens and lots of explosions! It seems that everyone is making, selling, and playing computer space-action video games. The competition in the game-maker's world is as fierce as that in the games they offer—and one has to make a really big splash to get noticed these days. Enter Cyberdreams Incorporated, who have already carved out a reputation for bringing in the big guns.

*CyberRace*, their latest offering, makes use of the talents of Syd Mead, a visual artist with such credits as *Blade Runner*, *TRON* and *2010*. After seeing the names of previous collaborators such as H.R. Geiger and Harlan Ellison, you too will be asking "Who are those guys?"

Yes, not only is *Pong* an antique, but 4, 8, or even 12 megabytes of game software does not turn heads anymore. No one is impressed by sheer size, even if the latest video games are larger than addressable mainframe memories were just a few years ago.

*CyberRace* ups the ante to 25 megabytes of disk space, and drops a hefty minimum system configuration requirement in your lap as well—a 20 MHz 386, DOS 5.0, 4MB RAM, 256 color VGA, 25 MB free disk space, and 550 K free RAM memory. (No protected-mode TSRs can be running, and the use of disk compression software is not recommended.)

Is bigger better? Sure. Typically these larger numbers translate to more action, more color, and more sounds, and

*CyberRace* is no exception.

War between the Terrans and Kaladasians has ravaged the galaxy. A big battle has wrecked whole solar systems and a freakish accident created a huge black hole. (Lots of surprises keep coming out of this black hole.) In the best, dystopic, science fiction tradition, a continuing series of combatant air races was established to help keep war from breaking out again.

Now for your part in all this: Your father was the hero of the Terran racing team until the Kaladasian racer Mugyor "accidentally" blasted him to bits. You know better. You get "drafted" to replace your father on the Terran racing team. Your name is Clay Shaw, and Terra has coerced you into racing by kidnapping your girlfriend Alyssia. Race for Terra, take out the right people during the race—and keep breathing yourself—and they might let you spend a little time with Alyssia. Race badly, or get your ship damaged, and the Terrans start treating Alyssia badly. Not a pretty sight. The plot twists and turns depend upon you and your racing performance.

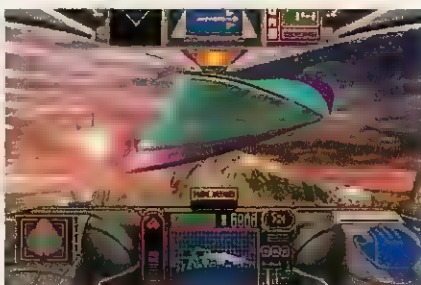
Part of the *CyberRace* exposition and plot twists are handled by a heavy-handed alien reporter who (voice output via a SoundBlaster or AdLib card), in overbearing network news style, brings you the latest race results, and discoveries from the black hole.

The first impression created by the digitized voices and eye-catching opening scenes is a good one. After the title sequence, you are ready to race, but first the story must be told, and you must listen very carefully, as your winning strategy depends on it. You acquiesce to Terra's demands as you watch Alyssia being dragged away. You're given a racing sled, some intelligence about the upcoming race, including possible bonuses to be earned, and now must equip your sled for battle by using your initial credit allowance.

You load up your ship with weapons using the order tablet. First you must consider strategy. Is this a regular race or a demolition race? What is your latest bonus offer from the Terran representative? Do you need to finish ahead of somebody or make sure someone doesn't finish? There are many weapons to choose from, some offensive and some defensive, but they are weapons that you will not really be knowledgeable about until you have had a chance to try them in combat. Your available credit balance also plays a part in your choices.

The ship can be controlled by joystick, Thrust-Master, or keyboard controls. The view screen is well laid out. Radar, rear view, weapons select, weapons charge, and weapons lock status are all clear and uncluttered. And for realism, these controls can get damaged, or deactivated in battle. In a nice game touch, the ship's damage display can, itself, be damaged.

Now the race begins, but noth-





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ing prepares you for how clumsy and confused you will feel at first. You spin around when you get hit. Chaos, destruction, and confusion reign almost from the first moment, because everyone is taking shots at you—what do you know, just like a battle. Also, these ships are shooting at each other, not just at you. They are dropping mines, and other exotic weapons are going off which may temporarily blind you or disable your controls. It's a real free-for-all, not just you against all the bad guys like in some games. Everyone starts the race, many don't finish. And yes, your friendly fire can kill your Terran teammates.

Wonderful, strange scenery goes by. The skies and the changes in hue as the ship changed course were especially impressive. And the opening race "course" was very reminiscent of the Venus radar mapper footage from NASA, both in its look and fluidity of the ship's movement over it. The use of shape, shading, and lighting was definitely a cut above other games; it had a ray-traced look that I enjoyed and found convincing.

My control of the ship was another matter. Terror and frustration were the order of the day. The controls take patience, training, and practice—this is not your son's Super Nintendo. It's more akin to a realistic flight simulator. When the ship gets hit, it can spin, you can be killed outright, ship navigation and thrust control can be disabled, or weapons can be disabled (either the weapons selector, selector display, or fire control). After you get blown up once, you give serious consideration to black market offers of "shark skin" shields.

The ship's controls felt touchy to me. They made me feel heavy-handed and out of control, but it was still fun to fly the sled. Maybe I was going too fast, or perhaps a specialty joystick (ours is a relatively inexpensive QuickShot) would help. No matter though, it is definitely not easy. I found it tough to stay within the course markers, though it is not strictly necessary to do so. A strong ego is recommended; be prepared to be patient, train, and die for a while. (Make liberal use of the game save to save and resume up to 10 different game points.)

I also liked the weapon and ship explosions. They looked realistic, more akin to those in the *Star Wars* movies, rather than the stylized expanding round balls I have grown accustomed to in other games.

I am not sure if the computer speed affects play, though I suspect it does, because play slows when you move from low through medium, to high level of "detail." (My computer is a 66MHz 486DX2, so your game speed and thus your game challenge may be reduced with slower models.) The game provided no explicit speed-of-play control.

At some point, the race is over and you get to see how you did in the standings, whether your ship and inventory were damaged, and most importantly, whether Terra thought you did well. This determines your credit

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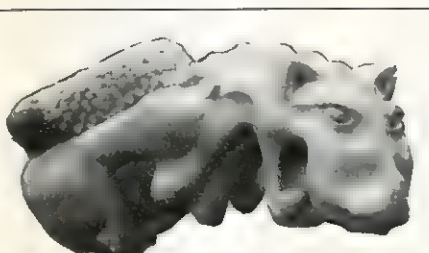
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balance and Alyssia's fate.

My son, Tom, enjoyed buying weapons and information on the black market. He also liked the game's humor and the personalities. One gets the usual Runyansque detective banter at the cantina from the arms dealer: "You get uglier every time I see you, Shaw." And one gets similar responses from the likes of the informant, the saboteur, and the bookie.

Once again, strategy, knowledge of the next race, and your budget are very important here as you spend your hard-earned race credits buying the latest black market weapons (at a premium price), dirty deeds, or information. Consider carefully whether you buy now or wait until weapons become generally available to all contenders, but at a cheaper price. You can also take a chance and place a bet through the bookie on the winning team and triple your money—bad odds, though, considering there are five contending teams.

So how do you win? Sorry, we can't tell you because we haven't been able to beat the nasty alien, Mugyor, in the big demolition race. After Mugyor's fifth victory speech, I got so frustrated I shouted, "Let's kick Mugyor's butt!" Tom coolly responded, "He doesn't have one for all we know, Dad."

There are many games that offer a clean plot and clean action—just press the fire button until you win. *CyberRace* is different, with messy plot and messy action, and it works—you know this when you feel like you just got off a roller coaster after a *CyberRace* session. *CyberRace* is fit for the dark visions of the future.

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## ESSAY

Continued from page 30

bell, who became his assistant in 1937 and took over the magazine in 1938.

Science fiction was a tiny world in those long-ago years. I remember when non-fan friends had to ask me what it was. The term "sci-fi" hadn't been invented. Book publishers didn't want it unless you were already

famous. Our only market was the pulps, and nobody got very rich writing pulp copy for a penny a word.

Yet John Campbell made it well worth doing. The greatest of science fiction editors, he turned *As-tounding* into *Analog* and made his early years there the "golden age of science fiction," inspiring the writing of a few other old hands such as Cliff Simak and such bright newcomers as Heinlein, Asimov and de Camp.

Street & Smith's printing presses and offices were all housed in an old brick building at 79 Seventh Avenue. The way to Campbell's office was down a gloomy tunnel through enormous rolls of paper. A big, barrel-chested man, he smoked cigarettes in a long holder and talked forever, always to his own creative point, except when he sometimes stopped to spray his nostrils.

He always had competition. When Gernsback ran into trouble again, he sold *Wonder* to Ned Pines, who published the Thrilling group with Leo Margulies as chief editor. The magazine lived on as *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, edited by Mort Weisinger under Leo's thumb. They paid a dependable cent a word, and half a cent for the short novels in *Startling Stories*.

I wrote for Leo because he kept asking, because the checks were quick, and because I was usually desperate for money. It was never much fun, however, because stories had to fit a pretty rigid formula, and Mort's creativity was limited mostly to inventing clever plot twists and gimmicks. He told me once that Leo didn't object to good writing; it simply didn't matter.

There were eventually a good many other titles, *Planet Stories* and *Captain Future* among them, all in the standard pulp size, printed on cheap pulp paper with the edges untrimmed, all aimed at male audiences more juvenile than Campbell's. Yet our world was still so small that we knew it well.

Was it a ghetto? So it was called by those restless souls who dreamed of escaping from the pulps to earn perhaps a dollar a word from such commercial slicks as *Col-lie's*, *Liberty* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, which lived on fat revenues from the

advertisers of new luxuries for the affluent society. Other writers aspired even more ambitiously to win recognition among the intellectual aristocrats who wrote for the "quality" magazines, where the science fiction pulps were regarded as "sub-literate nonsense," as one distinguished critic put it in *Harper's*.

Yet, ghetto or not, I felt proud and happy to be among my friends in science fiction. None of us were rich, but it was still possi-

ble to know most of the writers and editors and to read everything that everybody published.

If that ever really was a golden age, World War II brought it to a sudden end. I was an Army Air Forces meteorologist stationed in the Northern Solomons to forecast the tropical weather for the Marine air groups harassing the by-passed Japanese when I heard about Hiroshima.

Another science fiction fan brought me the news, and we seemed to be the only people on the island

who understood what had happened. Wells, of course, had written about war fought with uranium bombs as early as 1913. Heinlein had published such prophetic tales as "Blowups Happen" and "Solution Unsatisfactory." Most of us had written optimistic tales about harnessing the expected powers of the atom, though I had hoped not to see them in my own time.

The mushroom cloud marked the end of optimism. In science fiction, the first result was a plague of dismal post-nuke stories. The changes since have been too vast for summary. In some sense, science fiction has matured. Young fans grew up, went to college, got degrees and taught, earned money, bought books, became editors and publishers, learned to write, and sometimes still remained science fiction fans.

The book market was born when a few enterprising fans began reprinting the old serials they remembered and showed the major publishers the money to be made there. The pulps were largely wiped out by paperbacks and comic books and TV sitcoms.

And science fiction has at last escaped the ghetto. Or almost escaped. Though a few traditional academics still regard it as fluff, it's taught in many colleges. Scholarly criticism of SF has become an academic industry, with texts and journals and bibliographies and learned societies. I see massive studies of the likes of Edgar Rice Burroughs, something that still delights but also amazes me.

As for myself, 65 years after "The Metal Man," I'm happy that the dreams are still sometimes real enough to write, and grateful to all the friends who have let me stay in the game. □

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## TAKEN FOR A RIDE

Continued from page 57

or a few months downtime, I'll use the same gun that Peter's going to use on you. There'll be a certain justice in that, don't you think? A certain neatness."

"It doesn't leave you much time to hit the next guy," Joe observed, switching strategies yet again, with the practiced ease of an authentic arcade ace. "The guy who'll become the inventor of whatever-it-is once I'm out of the picture. There will be another guy, won't there? That's what you meant earlier when you said that your voices might have to do it over and over again. You and your voices should know full well that you can't unmake a scientific discovery whose time has come. If I don't hit the jackpot, someone else will."

"Perhaps," said the blond man, agreeably. "Maybe we're all helpless and there's nothing anyone can do to make the world better than it is, or better than it might be. But we have to try, don't we? We do have to try."

To his horror, Joe realized that the car was slowing down, coming smoothly to a halt. This is it, he thought. No lives left, and no way of knowing what score is showing on the board.

"Get out," said the blond man, softly.

**J**OE MADE NO MOVE TO OBEY, BUT IT made no difference. The driver was already out, and walking around the car. Frank had come to life again—as near to life as he ever got.

Joe groped at the fittings, trying to yank the phone clear of the console, but he didn't have a chance against the pressure of Frank's huge hands. When Peter opened the childproof door, the zombie shoved Joe out, empty-handed, to sprawl on the muddy ground.

I won't go down meekly, Joe thought, as he scrambled in the slippery mud, trying to get back on his feet. They can kill me, but I'm damned if I'll just stand by and wait for them to do it. He was possessed by rage, and all his attention was focused on the project of leaping forward to attack Roland Vane: to shove his fingers into the blond man's eyes; to sink a knee into his prematurely-aged balls. For Joe, if not for his adversary, this was very personal indeed.

But the power of desire wasn't enough. As soon as Joe was on his feet, the Incredible Hulk grabbed him again and held him still, seemingly without any effort at all.

With his arms pinned to his sides, Joe was brought around to face Vane and the driver. The wind was blowing rain into his face, and he had to blink, but there was light enough from the Silver Shadow's blazing headlamps to show him the lightly-jaundiced color of Vane's face. There was no glass wall between them now, but Vane looked as ghostly as ever.



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The man called Peter was holding a gun: one of those Red Army revolvers that had been the Russian black market's principal westward export for the last 15 or 20 years.

"I really am sorry, Joe," Vane said. "I know you're innocent, as yet, but prevention is always better than punishment, and you'll just have to take it from me that this will save you from becoming a truly evil man. If you have a soul, Joe, this little surgical operation might save it from the darkest depths of hell."

Joe struggled with all his might against Frank's grip, but he might as well have tried to turn back time.

He saw Peter lift the gun, and he heard a shot which sounded like the crack of doom. His eyes closed, reflexively, and he waited, squeamishly, for the pain to begin. He was horribly afraid of the pain.

He heard a cry of anguish, and for a moment thought that it must be his own—but when he opened his eyes again, Peter had fallen, and it was Vane who was wailing as he scrambled in the mud for the gun.

Joe struggled to take in the implications.

Vane couldn't pick up the revolver. Maybe Peter had gripped it too tightly as the spasm of death took hold of him, or perhaps the mud made it too slick to grasp. For whatever reason, Vane couldn't get it free in time. Joe blinked away an inconvenient raindrop just in time to see a round red mark appear in the blond man's forehead, an instant before the back of his head exploded.

Frank was too stupid to turn around, although it was obvious enough to Joe that the gunman must be behind them. All the zombie did was relax his grip, allowing Joe to squirm free and dive. Joe didn't even try to look back—he just kept his head well down while three more shots rang out. Somehow, he had known that there would be three: the giant wasn't the kind of man who'd go down in one. Mercifully, when he finally fell he didn't fall on top of Joe.

Strike three! Joe thought, as he heard the squelchy sound of the big man's body hitting the muddy ground. "Game Over and a new record score! What a hit!"

**H**E WASN'T SURPRISED, WHEN HE wiped his face after getting to his feet, to see that the assassin was a woman. He could have wished that she was better looking—she looked almost old enough to be his mother—but this was real life, after all, and she was handsome enough in a body-builderish sort of way. Her black hair would probably have looked sleek if it weren't for the pouring rain, and she would probably have been wearing seriously sexy clothes if she hadn't come out dressed to kill, in a jet black waterproof track suit and Nike trainers. Her gun was an automatic; Joe didn't recognize the make.

Joe's savior knelt down to start stripping

the bodies of their ID. When she'd finished, she threw a set of car keys to Joe, but they weren't the keys to the Rolls. That was good thinking, he figured, having by now collected his scattered wits. The Silver Shadow would be far too conspicuous to take back into town, and it would be very difficult for him to account for his possession of it if he were stopped.

"It's a red Clio, parked behind the bulldozer," the woman told him. She looked far less spectral than Roland Vane, and sounded as if she had everything under control. It was evident that not everyone who was wired up to the future turned into a freak.

"Can I help you with the bodies?" Joe asked, politely.

"You'll have to give me a hand with Frank's," she said. "The others are no trouble. The hole's just over here. I'll fill it in myself—I like driving the heavy stuff and the concrete's ready-mixed."

It wasn't difficult for the two of them to roll the enormous zombie into the waiting hole—Peter had obligingly driven them almost to the lip. Joe helped her with the others anyhow, although she could have moved them herself.

"I know this is a terrible line," said Joe, as Vane tumbled into the waiting pit, "but have we met before?"

"Only in your dreams," she answered.

"I can never remember my dreams," he told her. "I guess I'm not really cut out for this kind of game."

"There's a knack to it," she told him. "Getting started is the hard part, but it can be learned, if you have the motivation—and a good teacher."

**S**HE WAS STANDING STILL NOW, WAITING for him to go. She was really quite handsome, in spite of her age and all the mud that was clinging to her. Joe briefly reminded himself of all the rumored advantages of making love to older women.

"How do I get the car back to you?" he asked.

"I'll collect it," she assured him. "Not tomorrow, or the next day, but soon. Don't worry about a thing. Have a good time at the party tomorrow night."

"Who are you?" he asked, expecting exactly the kind of answer he got.

"I'm your guardian angel," she said, in a voice heavy with sexy sarcasm. "You're going to be hard work, I know, but it'll be worth it. We have a tough job to do, but we'll make a great team. You have a wonderful future in front of you, if you play your cards right. Now go."

"Am I really going to cause the deaths of millions of people?" he asked, hesitantly wondering if he ought to care more than he did. What were these hypothetical down-timers, after all, but phantoms in some VR game?

"Joe," she said, with a real cutting edge to



her voice, "you and I are going to cause the death of millions of universes. That's what making choices means. You'll be a fully-human being soon. There aren't many of us about yet, but take it from me...this is just the beginning. Now go, before you catch a chill and abort a billion fabulous futures. I promise I'll see you soon."

Obediently, he turned away.

**H**E BEGAN TO WALK, WITH THE RAIN lashing at his back, knowing that it always ended this way, whether it was a game or a movie or a ride. The hero always came through, always lived to fight another day. In any case, what he had told the blond man must be true. What had already happened, from the future's point of view, had to happen. Nothing else made sense. Surely Vane and the guardian angel were just filling in the fine detail of a history already on record.

It was dark in the shadow of the bulldozer; the Clio was just a black blur, and he had to grope for the door handle and fiddle the key into the lock. He couldn't help looking around nervously, wondering if there might yet be a third gang of assassins, waiting to overtrump the woman's winning play. A whole legion could have been hiding in the gloom, beyond the curtain of driving rain, but he told himself again that nothing disastrous could happen.

He told himself sternly that the partition between the present and the future couldn't possibly be shattered, even if the people of the future would one day contrive to see through it, because men of different ages were just phantoms to one another...but he couldn't shake off the tingling unease, even when the Clio's door opened and the interior light came on.

Ah, what the hell! he thought, as he got into the car. So what if it's true? If all reality is virtual from this day forward, and all the actors on the stage of history just icons to be shot at, who better to survive and thrive than an arcade ace who knows the value of ecstasy?

He laughed then. The idea that all future history might become a game for expert dreamers to play was by no means unappealing, seen in the right light.

He was, after all, a child of his time.

I always knew I was destined for something like this, he thought, as he fastened his seat belt. I always knew that there was something more, something better, something that really mattered. I always knew that I was destined to be on the inside, that all the practice I put in on all the games couldn't be for nothing, and couldn't be allowed to go to waste.

He turned the key in the ignition. He neither heard nor felt the explosion that abruptly ripped the car apart and blew his body and brain to fleshy shreds.

It was, in its fashion, the most merciful of all possible fates. □

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## CONTRIBUTORS

**JACK WILLIAMSON** IS A NATIONAL historic monument. He has just turned 85, having spent 65 years as an active professional in the field of SF. His first published fiction was "The Metal Man" in *Amazing* in 1928. He is well-known for his numerous popular series of novels: the space opera series *The Legion of Space*, his artificial intelligence *Humanoids* series, his anti-matter explorations in his *Seetee* series, and many others. In 1976 he was given the second Grand Master Nebula Award. His autobiography, *Wonder's Child: My Life in Science Fiction*, won a Hugo Award in 1986.

If you've been in a supermarket over the past few months, then you're familiar with the artwork of **Broeck Steadman**, whose recent book covers have included the re-releases of Michael Crichton's *Andromeda Strain* and *Rising Sun*. He is currently working on the art for another guaranteed bestseller, *Inca Gold*, the newest novel by Clive Cussler. One of his masterpieces you won't be seeing unless you're a New Jersey native is a 44 foot mural done for the Deane Porter Elementary School in Rumson, NJ. Steadman's work has also appeared frequently on the cover of *Analog*.

**Adam-Troy Castro** is hard at work on a novel, and has short stories coming out within the next few months in *Book of the Dead III*, *Journeys to the Twilight Zone II* and *Grails of the Night*.

In addition to his nonfiction about SF, **Dan Perez** also writes fiction, with his most recent sales being to the anthology *Cthulu's Heirs* and magazine *Cemetery Dance*.

**Mark W. Tiedemann** is a St. Louis native who has worked as a commercial photographer for almost 22 years. In 1988 he attended the Clarion Science Fiction Workshop, and in the following year made his first professional sale to *Asimov's*, and since then *F&SF* and *Universe 2*. Upcoming publications include *Tomorrow*, and a DAW anthology titled *Aliens Made Pregnant By Elvis*, edited by Esther Friesner. In addition to still doing photography, he plays keyboards and guitar, and is becoming acquainted with an alien life form, a puppy. He tells us that his story in

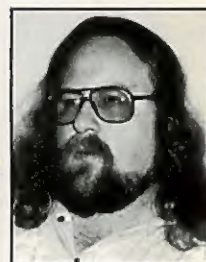
this issue came about from imagining *Life on the Mississippi* as if written by Jack Kerouac.

**Mark Hannon** received his art training at the Paris School in Hampden, CT. In addition to his SF art for magazines such as *Heavy Metal*, he also works in advertising. His next book cover to appear will be for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* from Pendulum Press.

**David Garnett** is a UK writer with careers as both novelist and editor. His novels include *Mirror in the Sky* and *Time in Eclipse*, as well as novelizations of games and films. He has edited the anthology series *Zenith* and the reincarnated *New Worlds*.



Brian Stableford



Richard Parks

**I**N "REAL" LIFE, **JEFFREY G. LISS** IS A lawyer in Chicago. He is on the board of advisors of the National Space Society and has previously served on its board of directors. In 1989, he was the chairman of the NSS annual International Space Development Conference (held in Chicago). His fiction and poetry have appeared in *Analog*, *Starlog* and *Offworlds*, while his non-SF articles have been published in general magazines, newspapers and legal periodicals.

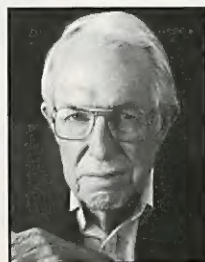
**Steven Popkes** has been publishing short stories in numerous SF markets since 1982. His first novel, *Caliban Landing*, was a critical success. Popkes is one of the writers taking part in the mosaic novel *Future Boston*, which is currently on sale.

**Richard Parks** is back from a SF hiatus, as his first sale was made in 1980, with the second in 1992. During the day, he is a computer systems manager. Editors take note that Parks has several novels seeking a home. A Mississippi native, he has a wife and 3 cats.

**Brian Stableford** has written dozens of novels, many of which straddle the SF and horror genres. The most recently and critically acclaimed of these are *The Empire of Fear*, *The Angel of Pain* and *The Werewolves of London*. He is also a respected critic and scholar of the field, and has served as a contributing editor to both massive volumes of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. Stableford has a degree in biology and a doctorate in sociology, which he taught for 12 years before turning to writing full time. □



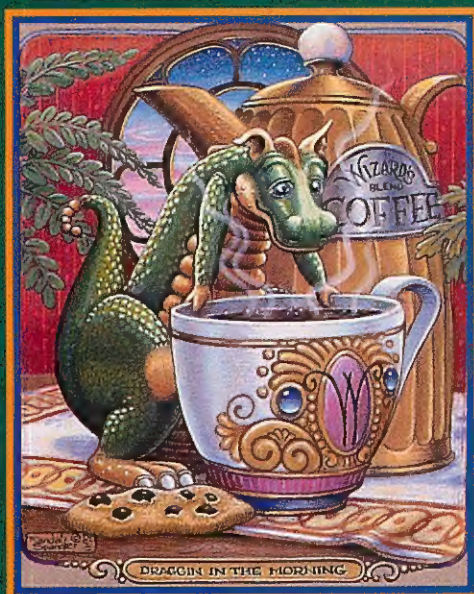
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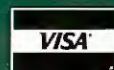
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